Robert Reed: Reunion

Fantasy & Science Fiction

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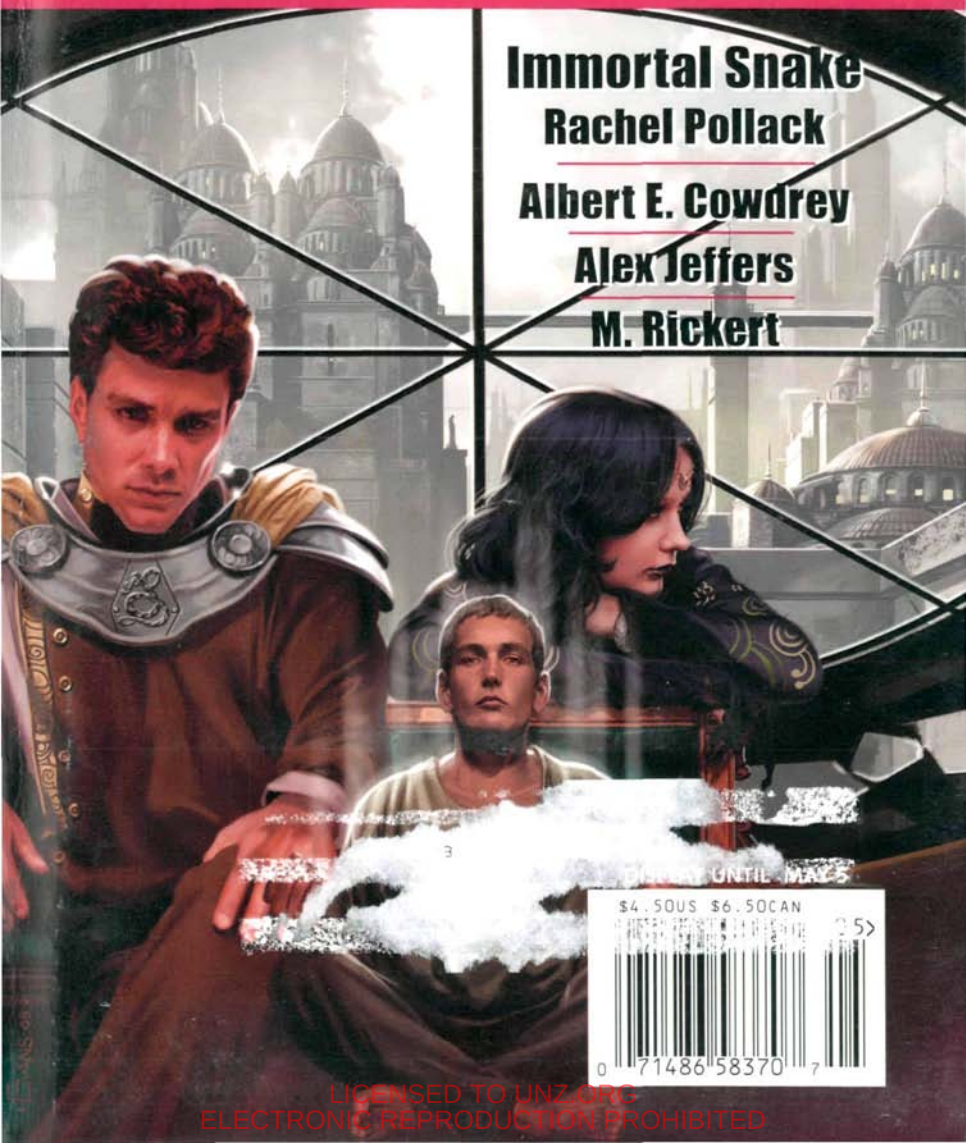

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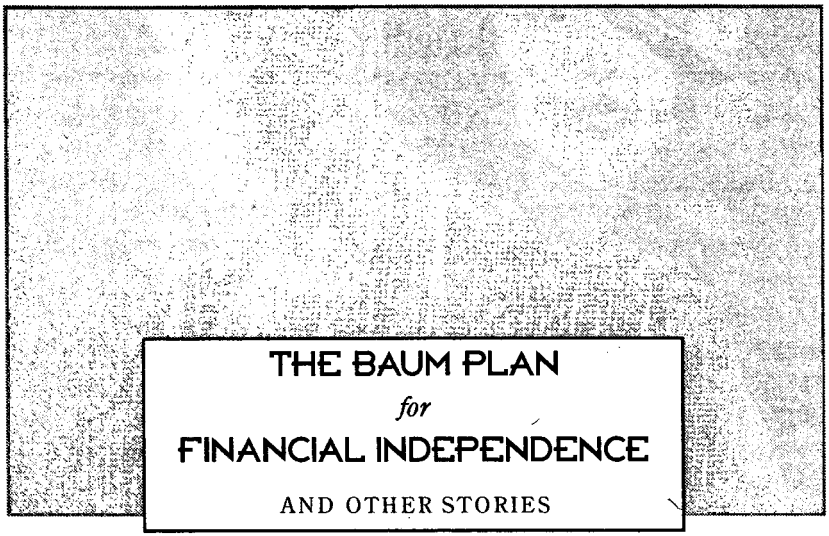

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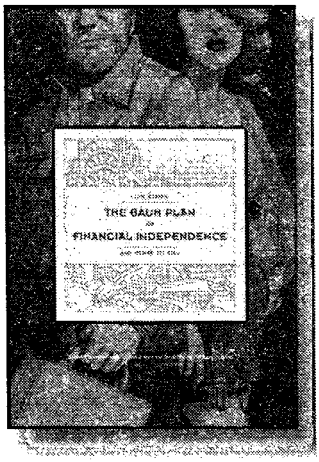

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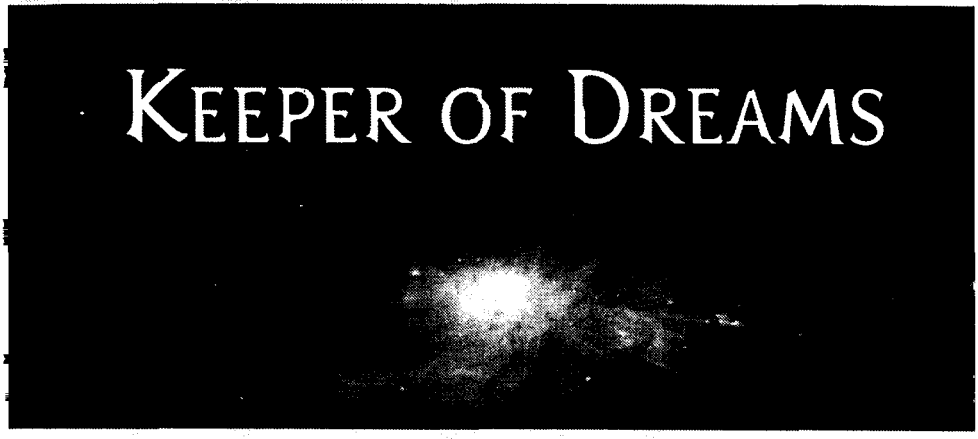

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Last month, Mr. Reed regaled us with Joe Carroway's epic story in "Five Thrillers." This month, the new tale from Nebraska's foremost science fiction writer is smaller in scope, but we think you'll like meeting the Twelve and the Ten just as much as you enjoyed "Five Thrillers."

Reunion

By Robert Reed

ELEVEN YEARS PAST HER LAST major role, yet Martha L. still looked ready for somebody to feed her her next line. Tiny, tiny sunglasses hovered above that perfect nose and the elegant, upturned chin. To my tastes, her face was the living definition of classical beauty, despite layers of makeup working in tandem with subcutaneous microchines, carefully obscuring the erosions of time. I'd always heard what a lucky actress she was: Martha L.'s projects typically made money, her divorces had been spectacular and timely, and her supporting casts were blessed with talent, but not so much they could ever steal the show. She was shorter than she looked in movies; as they say, high heels and a tall woman's frame helped the illusion of stately elegance. But when I saw her for myself, I finally appreciated just how small the woman was. She looked like a child climbing out of the razor-wagon — a willowy, middle-aged child still able to wear black short-shorts and a simple white shirt that accented her breasts and narrow waist. Despite a pair of thick-soled sandals, she leaped gracefully to the pavement. Then she happened to glance in my direction. The two lenses of her

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sunglasses were riding on magnetic curtains, hiding those lovely green eyes. I couldn't tell if she saw me or not, but a robust smile emerged. With a single expression, the actress managed to convey a wealth of possible emotions: indifference and passion, as well as an emotional chill and a natural, yet hard-to-define brilliance. She looked poised. She looked ready for anything. But then I noticed her tiny fingers dancing, and I realized that the woman was nervous, even vulnerable. Which made her utterly fetching to me.

"Easy, tiger," my date rumbled. "You don't want that."

"How do you know what I want?" I countered.

"I don't," he agreed. "But remember our story: I'm here with the love of my life. Which happens to be you, if I remember it right."

Kale was a tall gentleman, pleasant of nature and handsome despite those extra thirty pounds around his waist. We'd known each other for a couple years. I'd met him after first becoming interested in his school and old classmates. Subterfuge isn't my talent; right off, I had warned him that I was unabashedly gay and not interested, but thanks for flirting. Then flat out, I asked, "Speaking as one of the famous graduates, what do you think the explanation is?"

"Dumb-ass raw chance," he replied.

"Well, that's been said," I allowed.

"What else could it be?" Shrugging those round shoulders, he pointed out, "Besides, I'm not one of *them*. Some of us didn't get lucky. In fact, more than half of us are just ordinary fools."

"Out of twenty-three — "

"There's eleven," he interrupted. With an ease that hinted at a borderline obsession, he named each success story. Martha Lindergruber was last on his list: "Martha L.," according to the Actor's Guild. Then with a hard stare, Kale added, "What? You don't like my count?"

"You're missing somebody," I warned.

"Who?"

"Sarah Younts."

"Her?" He squinted and shook his head, retrieving everything in his brain about the woman. "Last I heard, she was some kind of clerk or secretary."

"Where's that?"

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"In Washington DC."

"She works for the government, Kale."

"I know that.

"In Langley, Virginia. Do you know whose offices are in Virginia?"

"Maybe."

"The Reformed CIA."

He refused to be impressed. "So she's a secretary for the spooks. They've got a hundred thousand people in their workforce."

"Except that's not her job," I told him.

He took a moment to accept that possibility. "So what then? Sarah's a spy?"

"All I know is that your classmate has State Department credentials, and she's been stationed at half-a-dozen different embassies. Always in hot zones, and in every case, big events have happened during her tenure." I produced an envelope and pulled out the first photograph. "This was taken by a tourist in Indonesia. Ignore the woman in the sundress. In the crowd...do you see her? This might be Sarah. Or she isn't. But the man on her right was definitely an arms merchant accused of selling bomb-grade plutonium, and this is two minutes before the son-of-a-bitch was shot through the heart and head."

I let him study the image before handing him an enlarged, heavily enhanced version.

"I haven't seen Sarah for years," he confessed, handing back the sketchy evidence. Then as he must have done many times in the past, he asked me, "So what do you think the explanation is?"

"I don't have one. Yet."

"That's interesting," he allowed. "From what I've seen, most people like you, 'the enthusiasts,' they begin with some half-logical answer that appeals to them. The fascination comes later. It's like a love affair, really. A meeting. A courtship. And then lust. And by lust, I mean that they'll collect any evidence, just so long that it seems to back up their own extraordinary, half-brained claims."

"Maybe that's true for others," I warned him. "But I've got different reasons."

"Such as?"

For the time being, I brushed the question aside. "A small-town high

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school in Missouri has a graduating class of twenty-three. And at least twelve of you have made a major impact in the world."

Kale said nothing.

"Think of the odds," I said.

He was well aware of how unlikely this was, but he had learned to keep his distance. Denying the obvious was important. Just like the other ordinary graduates who couldn't match their famous classmates' achievements, Kale maintained that dumb chance was responsible. And besides, he was thinking: What rational person would wish for the kind of celebrity that the Golden Eleven had to endure?

Kale sighed and shook his head.

Then with the faint trace of a smile — a suspicious smile, but with curious eyes — he asked once more, "What about you?"

"Can you keep a secret?" I asked.

"That depends."

"Patrick Goslick."

"Dead," Kale said instantly.

"I know that."

"Three years after graduation," he said. "The poor kid clipped a curb while riding his Harley, and slammed his head into a tree...."

I showed him a tight little smile.

"What?"

I handed over a second envelope and sat silently while he opened it and studied the officious contents. Twice he looked at me — at my face and eyes — before he replaced the birth records and DNA tests and handed the envelope back again.

"So what's next, miss?"

"My name's April," I reminded him.

"What's next, April?"

"Assume there is an explanation, and I don't mean dumb-ass raw chance," I proposed. "Think hard and give me a direction here. Someplace new to look, or some fresh way to think."

"To make things sensible?"

"Or even just one good thread that connects the lucky ones."

"Don't think I haven't tried," he said.

"Was there a special day or a specific incident, maybe?"

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"Maybe." Then Kale shook his head while rolling his skeptical eyes. "But here's the trouble, miss. I mean April. Get as old as I am, and you'll find out. You might feel that you can remember all of your life. Because it's your most precious possession, and why shouldn't you recall it? Maybe you'll even tell yourself that you know exactly what you've done and when you did it. But the sad truth is, none of us remembers more than a little fraction of what has happened to us...even our best, most blessed days, April...they are mostly and forever forgotten."

IN THE ENSUING months and years, what had been a comfortably strange mystery grew, the Internet as well as the old-fashion rumor mills feeding interest in what were now called the Golden Twelve. Sarah Younts's role in national security was soon exposed, forcing her into an abrupt retirement and a seven-figure advance for her life story. Suddenly the world seemed full of people with the time and insane focus to study the lives of a dozen strangers, trying to piece together any workable explanation for what stubbornly refused to be explained. (I was never the only nut-job, and I can't say that fact made me sleep any easier.) Then came word of the thirty-year class reunion, and with that, the story managed to grow even bigger. Against a new set of long odds, each of the twenty-two surviving graduates returned his or her questionnaire, completed in full and including promises to make an appearance at the festivities. One of the Little Ten had bravely offered her home to host the event — a modest ranch-style within sight of the old high school. Access had to be tightly controlled: Three of her classmates were multibillionaires, while two more were major politicians with their eyes on the same White House. There would be roadblocks and prepositioned security systems, and the known crazies would be stopped at the county line, while the official press were stationed in the school cafeteria. Being Kale's date was my ticket in — a bit of luck after a couple years of comfortable friendship. But to make him happy, I had to pay a high cost: I changed my hair and slipped into a nice dress that was without question the most heterosexual thing I'd worn since my own high school experience.

"Hello, Kale."

"Hey, Martha."

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Martha L. was standing between the razor-wagon and her date — a big silent gentleman with muscles and a plastic smile, and apparently, no name. She shook Kale's hand and then mine, telling both of us, "It's a lovely evening."

It was a hundred and three degrees in the shade, with humidity and a fleet of soot-gray helicopters circling just above tree height.

"It's certainly nice of Carla to invite us," said the movie actress who had lost two Oscars. "Really, I think this is just the way to do this reunion...you know...back in our old haunt. Just us and our families and friends."

On that optimistic note, the four of us walked to the front door.

Carla, our hostess, was a large woman in the final throes of a long, celebrity-induced mania. She was thrilled to have us in her house, and in the next breath, she wanted us to leave her house, ushering us into a backyard that had been severely modified for this single occasion. A transparent tent was hung overhead, supported by the best spiderweb modern factories could weave. Portable air conditioners pumped out cool air. Antinoise generators masked the clatter of helicopters, while a round fountain pushed a stream of punch from a wide nipple, the cold red juice recirculating through a basin large enough to serve as a bathtub.

I couldn't help but notice that the punch resembled blood.

A tiny table was reserved for the official guest book. Carla insisted that each of us sign in, although her intensity dropped noticeably once Martha Lindergruber had handed the official pen over to Kale.

I used my time at the book to read names, counting those who hadn't shown quite yet.

The billionaires were present — three tightly wound, endlessly focused captains of industry standing close together, happily trading whatever kind of stories it was that made their kind grin and laugh in unison. The ex-quarterback, now the first-string color man for the NFL Network, was sitting in a big lawn chair, resting his new knees while sharing football stories with several awestruck teenage boys. But an even bigger crowd of admirers had gathered near the two little bald men — partners from childhood and the designers of three of the top virtual reality games of all time. That made six of the Golden, plus Martha L. It took some doing, but eventually I spotted a mousy lady hiding near the

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lilacs — the top-selling writer of historical romances in the English-speaking world. A few moments later, the ninth came walking out of the house, wiping his hands on his pants after a trip to the bathroom. The present rumor — a credible rumor, as it happened — was that the gentleman would soon win a Nobel in medicine for his work with life-extension in rhesus monkeys. And if his elixirs succeeded in human trials, he would spend his next century or two enjoying his own well-earned billions.

Still missing were two politicians, and Sarah Younts.

But that made perfect sense. In a bit of obvious theater, the junior Senator from Missouri and the five-time Congresswoman from Nevada soon arrived together, arm in arm. No doubt there had been high-level negotiations between their respective camps. It must have been decided that their best strategy was to pretend an amiable friendship for cameras stationed in the outside world, as well as any audience lurking inside here. And then a few minutes after their arrival, when the applause had fallen away and the evening was settling into a rhythm of idle chatter and determined one-upsmanship, the lifelong spy slipped in quietly through a side gate.

My plans — as much as I had any — involved approaching the ex-quarterback. But when I stood close to the man, listening to his heroic recounting of his Super Bowl loss, the fellow sounded sloppy and a little too drunk, and in ways you don't usually see in talented athletes, stupid.

No, I decided, my back-up target was the right one.

If anything, Sarah was even more forgettable than the mousy little writer. She was average in height and utterly plain, her eyes watery brown and her hair turning to snow without any fight. We made eye contact, and I offered a darling little smile. Sarah assumed that I was nobody. She allowed me to approach, offering a bland, "Nice evening," before I managed to settle on her right.

I didn't speak.

So she introduced herself and asked for my name.

"April Vermeer," I said. "Kale brought me."

Sarah's reaction was an honest, slightly surprised smile. Then she glanced at the pudgy, almost fifty-year-old man, her expression saying something like, "Good for old Kale."

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Old Kale was trying to have a normal conversation with poor worn-out Carla. He was assuring her that the yard was lovely and she was the best hostess ever, and yes, everyone seemed to be having a wonderful time. But he felt my eyes, and he gave me a quick glance just then, and a wink.

The poor fellow. In a fit of rare duplicity, I had neglected to tell Kale my plans for this evening.

"Actually, Kale brought me as a favor," I mentioned.

Sarah tipped her head. "A favor? For you?"

"More for my father," I said.

She looked at me, studying my features, the first trace of recognition showing around her wise brown eyes.

"Pat Goslick," I said.

"Your father...?"

"My mother lived in St. Joe. She was a senior in high school and gave up her baby to a very sweet couple, and I had no idea who my biological parents were, at least until a few years ago."

What emotion that news brought, I couldn't tell. The face beside me was older than most, worn down by years of tropical sun and heroic worries. Sarah looked tired suddenly. But she appeared to be under control of her emotions. When a smile seemed necessary, she smiled. Then with a cautious tone, she said, "Huh. How about that."

"So I guess I really belong here," I said, making my voice loud enough to carry.

Was it my imagination, or did the air beneath the tent grow quieter now?

"Poor Pat," said Sarah. "That was so sad, that crash."

"And it was inevitable," I snapped.

She didn't make any sound.

"I know a good deal about it," I said. Then I took a step back, speaking even louder. "At least, I have a pretty clear idea what must have happened. Thirty years ago, give or take."

The professional spy showed me a blank, watchful face.

"Except I don't know exactly who's responsible for my father's death," I called out. "Really, after all this time, that's the only question that wants me to find an answer."

* * *

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A glass of blood-colored punch was warming in my hand. The high heels that had been squeezing my poor feet seemed to have vanished, leaving me with the sensation of floating above the clipped green grass. My voice was nervous and a little too practiced, but that was forgivable since I'd been contemplating this moment for the last several months. With a calculated pace, I offered my life story to Sarah — nothing in the tale particularly important, but taking my time, allowing everyone with a vested interest the chance to learn about my little bombshell. Sure enough, some of the Golden Twelve drifted closer, pretending their own conversations but mostly eavesdropping on my recollections about being a difficult child for my poor adoptive parents. Others sent aides or girlfriends or various tagalongs — loyal subordinates who actually stood beside us, sometimes throwing out uninformed little questions, fishing for answers to check against whatever biographical material was being presently excavated on the Web. Was I genuine? And more important, was I dangerous? Probably and probably not, the Twelve finally decided. My story had progressed well into my adult years when the game-designers joined Sarah, followed by the others, each person finding some tiny piece of ground from where they could comfortably hear what I was saying and offer whatever they might to the conversation.

I described tracking down my birth mother, and through her, my dead father. Then I paused, taking a deep useless breath before concluding, "And that's pretty much the story of my life. I hope you're not too bored, Ms. Younts."

"Call me Sarah."

"Sarah." I took another breath, this time looking at each of the Twelve. Martha L. was standing farthest away, her sunglasses removed, those exceptionally large eyes staring at nothing but me.

"'The story of a life,'" I said, offering an unexplained bow of thanks in Kale's direction. "A good friend once explained this to me: There's no such creature as a life story. As much as we'd like to think so...as much as we need to believe in our own epic...it is something that cannot exist."

The ex-quarterback growled dismissively. Otherwise, nobody made a sound.

"This is what I believe," I warned. "What we call 'life' is just a mass of disconnected events, each more random than the last. It isn't even a

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string of incidents and accidents, because that implies sequential ordering, and the true ingredients of any life overlap, competing desperately with each other. Existence is not as organized as beads riding on a necklace. But the human brain, like or not, is built to find order in any chaos, even where it doesn't exist. That's why we can recognize Jesus on an egg yolk. That's why we can take any mishmash and build a good fat story out of it. Plot lines are a refuge, something hard-wired into our soggy little brains — a talent that probably gave our ancestors insights that genuinely mattered. And as a species, we love nothing better than that good final chapter where the loose ends are tied up, and some overarching moral is earned, and learned, and those characters left behind can add a measure of happiness to their illusionary life stories."

Portions of my audience were losing their focus. Children and various assistants began hunting for fresh distractions. But none of the Twelve looked away, or blinked. Or in some cases, some of them seemed to quit breathing.

"A high school graduating class that is wildly successful," I said. "Twelve life stories, each generating the kind of fame that deserves envy and long-winded biographies...and how can that be?"

"Chance," Kale called out from beside the punch bowl.

"Always a possibility," I conceded with a wink.

"Or it's the end of a lot of hard work," Carla offered. Probably alarmed by the sudden change of mood, our hostess had pushed her way to the front row, that fat face grinning wildly at her honored guests before giving me a warning stare. "Hard work and an excellent education coupled with Midwestern values...that's what helped everybody here — "

"Bullshit," I said.

She flinched.

I said, "I've seen all of your test scores, Carla. Your IQ, and your college entrance exams...maybe you don't realize this, but you consistently tested out as being smarter than eight of these success stories. You had the second best grade point average. You enjoyed the same background that you praise, and all your life, you have worked like a demon, Carla. Yet after three failed businesses and two useless degrees, you came back to this little town, and if that isn't enough irony, you work in your old high school as a guidance counselor."

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The woman shrank down.

"I know every half-assed hypothesis that's ever been proposed," I promised. "Have you heard the gene-for-fame notion? It assumes there's some rare mutation common to many if not all famous souls — a gene with subtle neurological enhancements that we can't yet test for; a gene that gives its recipient smarts as well as a burning ambition. But even if such a gene existed, nobody here is all that closely related to anybody else. I've checked. And if there were such a powerful gene, you'd expect that it would show up in quite a few other Missourians. Wouldn't you?"

Nobody answered.

"Of course there's the viral version of that same idea. A weird bug infects half of your class and leaves you brain damaged/mind-enhanced. How the physiology of such a plague would work is a mystery. But maybe there is something to it, and if the virus can mutate into a more communicable form, then our world might soon be home to millions of hypersuccessful individuals. And God have mercy on our souls."

I laughed quietly.

"Or maybe over the years, they have helped each other," Carla mentioned. "Maybe? A synergy of talents, maybe?"

This wasn't her favorite explanation. Carla grimaced as she spoke, realizing that if it was true, then her friends had long ago left her behind.

I looked at Sarah. "Did any old classmates give you a helping hand? And did you even once do a favor for even one of them?"

She said, "No," to both questions.

"Plenty of observers have checked the records," I explained. "Except for our game-builders and a partnership that began in their freshman year, none of the Twelve have been substantially helped any of the others. Each of you has his or her own industry, niche market, or political party. In fact, from what I can see, some of you don't seem to particularly like each other."

I said, "It's a stumper, this puzzle is. I mean, how could one little group navigate their way through so many random events and still end up at the summit? The pinnacle? For a long time, I've thought about this. I researched all of you, and I sought help from people more imaginative than I, and when I slept, I dreamed these fantastic, useless dreams about you. And after all of that, there's only one explanation that fits what I know."

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"You don't know anything," our hostess declared.

Carla was furious. Like me, she had an enormous investment in this gathering, and not only had I taken control of her party, I had ruined her carefully enforced mood of banal pleasantness. This wasn't the evening that she had spent months dreaming about, and the tears cutting into the blush on her cheeks made me feel empathy for the poor woman.

I looked at Sarah then. I glanced at the game designers. And then in quick succession, I measured every other important face.

"You had help," I said. "Didn't you?"

"Get out," Carla demanded. "I want you out of my house — "

"Thirty years ago, something happened," I said. "I think I have a reasonable guess about when it happened, and maybe where...although I've still got several competing hypotheses to explain what it was exactly and who actually gave you the help — "

"April," said Kale.

My friend had slipped around from behind.

"You're not welcome here anymore," Carla assured me.

"This really is getting weird," said Kale, one big palm dropping on my bare shoulder. "How about you and I step out front for a little while — ?"

"If I leave," I threatened, "then I'll tell the world what I know, or at least what I think I know. But if the Twelve sit down and listen to me, then I promise — I mean this — their secret will die with me."

Carla grabbed me by the arm, yanking hard enough to bruise.

But then Sarah pushed Kale's hand away and threw a comforting arm around Carla's shoulders. And after a long glance at the other Eleven, she said, "Darling," to the sobbing, distraught woman. "Why don't you show us to your basement, darling? Right now, please. Please?"

FOURTEEN PEOPLE spilled into a cramped family room. The furnishings and paneled walls were badly in need of updating. In the adjacent laundry room, a rattling dehumidifier was waging a losing war against moisture and mold. I noticed the little table where plastic trophies and pot-metal plaques were put on display — honors achieved in softball tournaments and debate club and the like. The grand achievements of one obscure family; I noticed that nobody had taken the trouble to dust the

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golden batter standing on its narrow pedestal. Yet really, for all their wild successes, the Twelve had achieved little more that would actually last. Fifty years after their deaths, how many of these names would remain in the public mind? And if anybody remembered even one of them five hundred years from now, it would be more a testament to improvements in memory and minds — a civilization built on superintelligence, where the generations might entertain themselves by unveiling the most obscure trivia.

Carla lingered at the bottom of the stairs, wringing her hands when she wasn't wiping her wet face.

Finally Kale appeared, and after a concerned look in my direction, he led his old classmate back up the stairs, closing the door in his wake.

"Pat Goslick," I began.

"We know," the quarterback snapped. "He was your dad."

With a beer in one hand, he was easing his frame into the best chair available. The others shared two beat-up sofas and three folding chairs found in a corner, while the rest settled on sofa arms and sofa backs or just stood flush against the ugly, water-stained walls. Two people were standing: Martha L. in the back of the room, and me in front, my back to the trophy table and my arms trying to relax at my sides.

"Pat was the very best in your class," I said.

Maybe I feared disagreement; definitely I hoped to see heads nodding in agreement. But the reaction was as close to nothing as could be. A couple people used the pause to clear their throats. Others shifted their butts, trying for comfort in their new seats. Otherwise, I received looks of watchful indifference.

"My biological mother told me," I continued. "She claims that my father was the smartest person she'd ever known, and he was physically beautiful, and he was decent and kind, and by any standard, he was an exceptional athlete. Better than 'that silly old quarterback,' she claims."

The old quarterback sipped his beer and said nothing.

I said, "For a long time, my working hypothesis was that the rest of you had sacrificed my father. You robbed him of his talents and maybe his life too."

"How could we have done that?" Sarah asked.

"Black magic." I shrugged, laughing at myself. "I really didn't

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understand the methods that you might have used. But in my endless research, I learned that during her junior year, the Congresswoman from Nevada went through a phase. She dressed Goth-style and played with satanic symbols and all that." I looked at the woman, adding, "It was just a phase, I know. But what if you'd hit upon some ancient spell that could transform souls, and meanwhile leave my father sacrificed and dead?"

The Twelve stared at me, offering nothing.

"Except I don't believe in magic, black or white or any gray between." With my hands, I swept that possibility aside. "And even if my father could have lived a full life, why does talent make success inevitable?

"More than anything, chance is what builds success and fame.

"And how do you manipulate chance? How can you guarantee that the die will come up your favor? Well, you clearly have to cheat somehow. And when it comes to the mechanics of cheating...I'll warn you, these fields are not my usual strength. Like physics, for instance. And in particular, quantum physics."

There.

Most definitely, my audience stirred.

"I know there was a pretty big UFO sighted during your senior year. And I've read about that series of cattle mutilations in that decade. Maybe one or both of these vague events have a role to play. But people are always seeing odd lights in the sky, and livestock always end up dead in odd ways. No, after a lot of hard consideration, I decided just to focus on the twelve of you, and my father too. Was there any point in time where all of *you* were together? A class, a club? Any event that joined each of you?"

Again, most of the faces seemed distinctly uncomfortable.

"Physics," I repeated.

Then I smiled, waiting until finally, from the back, the genuine scientist in the group asked, "What do you mean?"

"In your senior year," I pointed out, "everybody here took general physics from Dr. Westbrook."

People glanced at one another.

But not Sarah. She was as close to me as anyone and far too shrewd to give away clues during this clumsy interrogation. "What are you thinking, April? Just tell us, please."

"Dr. Westbrook taught all of the sciences for one year," I said, "and

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then he left just as suddenly as he arrived. Supposedly there was an affair with one of his students — "

In reflex, half a dozen people glanced at Martha L.

"And he left town that next summer, before the scandal turned public and ugly. But really, that isn't what interests me." I smiled grimly, saying, "I've looked for the man's history, and I can't find much. There was a Dr. Westbrook working for MIT and then the Sandia laboratories, but all of his files, including every photograph of him, are either lost or drenched in secrecy. All I know for certain is that he vanished from the Sandia rosters, and soon after that, a man with his basic name arrived here, showing certification and looking for work."

Martha L. was leaning hard against the wall, her head tilted back and the eyes halfway closed.

I said, "And after living and working here...after a few more years of wandering...the mysterious Dr. Westbrook dropped off the face of the Earth. Which might just well be the literal truth."

"What are you thinking?" Sarah prompted.

"The man was a magician, but with theoretical physics. Or maybe he was never a true human male, but instead he was some agent or power or explorer or criminal from another time or dimension. Really, I don't have any clear explanation to offer. And maybe none of you do, either." Then I shook a finger at them, adding, "But all of you took his physics class. And I think there was a day, probably late in the spring semester, when he decided to run an experiment with you." I had to pause, breathing hard for a few moments. Then with my best pleading tone, I asked, "Am I a little bit close?"

Sarah glanced at the others, and then she turned to me, saying, "Maybe we should go back to the party — "

"Many-worlds," I blurted.

There. I watched eyes grow big and faces light up.

"The oddest part of quantum mechanics, I think, is the many-worlds idea." I felt thrilled and terrified. "Reality is built on an infinite number of discrete moments, each moment encompassing every possible configuration of matter and energy, and every Present splits into countless Nexts. And every Next splits and splits again. And maybe if you possessed sufficient power, it would be possible to take any life and then guide it through that endless tangle of possibilities...."

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No one moved. Whatever else I had accomplished that night, I could claim that I had genuinely stunned the Twelve.

"What did Dr. Westbrook do?" I pressed. "Did he say, 'Tell me where you want to be in thirty years, and I can make it happen.'?"

I could hear people breathing. Even the old spy was excited enough to gulp at the damp, moldy air.

Martha L. had turned sideways against her wall, eyes closed, showing me her lovely profile.

"And so each of you did it," I continued. "Not that any of you actually believed in whatever trick he was trying to perform. But it would have been fun — for kids, for anyone — playing that game where you paint some images of the big house where you're going to live someday, and the books you'll write, and the discoveries you'll make...and how you'll defend our country in adventurous ways...not to mention ending up rich and happy and exceptionally famous...."

The quarterback pulled his bulk forward, dropping his half-drunk beer onto a battered little coffee table. Otherwise, the room was filled with people too weak to move or speak.

"So that's what happened," I said. And then, with a pride that I believed was earned, I added, "I guessed right! Didn't I?"

Sarah looked up.

In a measured tone, she told me, "No, April. No."

What did she say?

"In a lot of ways, no. Your story isn't at all what happened."

I shook my head. "I don't believe you."

"Who cares?" the quarterback barked. "You're wrong, and get over it, girl."

But no obsession surrenders easily. I leaned against the table, feeling the softball trophy tilt and then fall onto its side. Looking at my own feet, I maintained, "Something did happen with this group. You can't tell me otherwise."

They began to mutter among themselves.

"My father!" I blurted. "Tell me: Was he part of it? Whatever happened, was he there?"

Nearly a dozen faces shook their heads, but not to say, "No." They were voting for silence only, and thankfully Sarah didn't bother to ask for

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their permission. She caught my gaze and said, "You deserve to know. He was part of it, yes. Pat was."

Others complained about this breech.

Then the old spy jumped to her feet, snapping at them, "If she doesn't deserve to hear this, who does?"

I was crying now.

Sobbing.

"Honey," Sarah said, touching my elbow and using a warm, natural voice. "I won't tell you the specifics, April. And don't ask again. But one thing you're right about...when it happened, none of us truly believed that we were mapping out our next thirty years. How could we accept it, really? So maybe our plans weren't thought out quite as well as they should have been...."

"My father?" I muttered.

"The accident, yes." She shook her head. "You know, that's when we started to believe that it might just be possible. That what we had done was something real, and there were going to be some very large consequences for what had always seemed preposterous."

"Do you know what my father wanted?"

"Yes, I do," replied Sarah. With a sweep of an arm, she promised, "We all know. Everybody here got to hear what each of us was asking from Life."

"Dad wanted to die?"

"No, April. He wanted to be a hero, to save some important lives. At least, that was one piece of his wish list."

"Just tell her," the quarterback snapped.

And then from the back of the room, the clear strong voice of the actress said, "That motorcycle accident destroyed his mind, April. But not his heart and kidneys, the liver and such."

I was trembling. "So who got them?"

"Before we tell you that," said Sarah, her warm hand returning to my elbow. "I want you to know...really, your father might have been the best person in our group. Because when he made his wish list, he wasn't just thinking about himself. In fact, his first desire was to someday have a child...a decent, lovely, smart, and creative child, he wanted...and regardless what happened to him, Pat wanted her to grow up and become a spectacular success in her own right...."

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* * *

A few more minutes of measured enlightenment, and then our meeting broke up and we filed out of the basement and into the back yard. The Ordinary Ten were sitting in a wide circle, exchanging stories about local gossip and raising teenagers and the strange adventure that came with growing old. After that, the evening turned into an endless blur of overlapping conversations and quiet little crying jags. Now and again Kale would settle beside me, holding my hand. How I was doing? "Fine," I would lie. And was I finding the answers I wanted? "More than enough," I promised, and left matters there.

People from both the Ten and the Twelve were eager to share remembrances of their dead friend. I can't remember half of what I was told, and the order of these conversations is totally lost to me. Somebody swore, "I see Pat in your eyes and face, and even in the way you hold your beer." Several voices offered little snatches of the valedictorian address that my father delivered — obtuse words about promise and hope caging in the blackness and cold that is everywhere. I was working on my second or third beer, or maybe my fourth, when the quarterback took me to the back of the yard. He was drunker than ever, and happy. I thought I was going to be fending off an unwelcome advance, and making ready, I decided which knee I would kick. But no, he wanted nothing but to warn me. "For me, it was like this," he said, keeping his voice low and secretive. "I was a sixth round draft pick with a weak arm and no leg speed. But I had this one fat talent. Whenever the game was on the line, I'd heave the ball where I shouldn't have, and more often than not, something would go right. In double coverage, my receiver would make the catch. Or the safety would trip up. Or maybe there'd be an interference call."

"I know," I said. "I've studied your old games."

"Eighty, maybe ninety passes made my career," he said with a practiced, confessional tone. "But here's the thing you should think about, young lady. Whatever talents you've got...I don't know you, and maybe you don't know your gifts for yourself yet...but whatever you've got, unless you're willing to throw blind off your back foot, you'll never get all of this good luck to work for you.

"Understand what I'm saying?"

"You want me to throw into triple-coverage," I replied.

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"Which I stopped doing in both Super Bowls," he muttered, an ancient pain showing through the booze. "I got practical and careful, and we got beat. And that was that."

"Thank you for the advice," I said.

"Don't mention it."

There were more conversations that I can't recall, and another one and a half beers. Then it was after one in the morning, and one billionaire was leaving with his entourage. I stood in the middle of the yard, turning a slow circle while counting faces. Most of the Twelve had slipped away. Carla and Kale were the last of the Ten holding out. I spotted my date sitting beside Martha L. They were talking, smiling. The actress had one tiny hand on Kale's thigh, and I couldn't help but notice that her man-friend had vanished completely. A flicker of jealousy made me alert. Made me thoughtful. And a couple insights struck me at the same moment.

I started to walk, but Carla caught me.

"I'm sorry," she had to tell me. "I was rude before. I want to apologize."

"And I was a bitch," I offered.

We shared a little laugh and then some idle chatter. Then I thanked her for the party, and hearing some part of that, Kale rose and came over to ask, "Is it time to leave?"

"Nearly," I said. "Would you give me a minute first?"

He followed my gaze, smiled and said, "I'll be out front."

Martha Lindergruber remained in her chair. I settled where Kale had been, feeling his residual heat. "Two things puzzle me," I said.

Those big green eyes glanced at me.

"Sarah explained that when my father died, when his heart and the other parts went to all those good people...she implied that's when your group started to believe that maybe this was all for real...."

"And?" Martha prodded.

"Your first big break came a year earlier. You played the plucky teenage daughter of the President...."

The actress looked at me again.

"But now why wouldn't your success constitute good hard evidence? That's what I want to know."

She sat back in her chair. "Make a guess."

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THE GUIN SAGA

By Kaoru Kurimoto

"A rousing tale of intrepid heroes, horrid villains, and wicked supernatural creatures."
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"You're part of the group, sure," I said. "But for whatever reason, you refused to actually fill out your wish list."

Martha closed her eyes, and smiled, and after a contemplative silence, she said, "Maybe I just wanted to make it with my own talent."

I said, "By that measure, you're the biggest star in this group."

Delight filled that youthful, lovely face.

Then Martha opened her eyes again, and she reminded me, "You said that two things puzzled you."

"A string of men, and three failed marriages," I said quietly. Then I risked placing my hand on her bare little knee. "Ever wonder if you're meant for a different kind of dating?"

She looked at my hand, then my face.

And because there is no such creature as a story — just a series of events with arbitrary starts and finishes — I will select this moment to say, "And the princess lived happily ever after."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Iron Kissed, by Patricia Briggs, Ace Books, 2008, $7.99.

I WASN'T going to review another of Patricia Briggs's books so soon, but this latest entry in the Mercy Thompson series is outstanding enough to warrant a look.

One of the main reasons I want to bring *Iron Kissed* to your attention is to point out how Briggs continues to let her characters grow and change. I've mentioned it before in this column: how character growth in a series, while a stand-by in most mystery series, is in rather shorter supply in most series set in the fantasy/sf field. Too often you can pick up the first and tenth volume of an f/sf series and the character is interchangeable between the books.

I think it's enough of a leap of faith to ask readers to believe that extraordinary things happen to a series character on a far more regular basis than they do to most individuals in the everyday world in which we live, without also expecting readers to believe that such experiences wouldn't have a major impact upon the character's life.

Yes, these characters are often extraordinary in their own right (in the case of this series, Mercy, while she has a career as a car mechanic, is also a shapechanging coyote). But I think such characters should still learn and grow from their experiences. Otherwise, they become so distant from humanity that the author risks the chance that her readers will find nothing with which to connect to in her characters.

That said, just as we can repeat mistakes in our own lives, fictional characters don't have to be immune to such failings, either. That can be a story all on its own.

In *Blood Bound* — the last book in this series — Mercy gave a helping hand to her vampire friend Stefan, which resulted in her getting caught up in a struggle that put

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not only herself but her friends at risk. So you'd think she'd learn when her old boss and mentor, a fey named Zee, comes to her with a similar request. As before with Stefan, there won't be any danger; she's just there to observe. Right.

But Mercy doesn't think twice before agreeing. If she didn't have that unswerving loyalty to her friends, then she wouldn't be the same character with whom a growing legion of readers have fallen in love.

And speaking of love, her love life is a mess as well. She has two alpha males from the local werewolf community vying for her and she's been putting them both off because she can't make up her mind between them — never realizing the tension this is causing in the pack.

Needless to say, both plotlines create more havoc in Mercy's life, but that isn't what makes the book so good. No, for all Briggs's deft hand with her prose and ability to give us an entertaining story, this time she delves deep into her characters and the result is a powerful and moving story that explores loyalty, responsibility, and the repercussions that an act of abuse can leave upon the lives of those directly affected, as well as those around the victim. It's not candy-coated and there are no easy solutions.

Those wanting to escape reality and look for some light entertainment should pick another book. But those readers who want some real meat on the bones of their stories will be amply rewarded with *Iron Kissed*.

I've liked and admired pretty much everything I've read by Briggs to date, but this book is a leap into a whole new level of writing for her.

(And just in case you were about to ask: yes, you get more depth if you read the books from volume one, but Briggs always does a good job of filling in background without going overboard, so you can jump in on the series with any of the books.)

Runemarks, by Joanne Harris, Knopf, 2008, $18.99.

I'm not one of those pessimists who assumes that just because someone is good at one thing, they won't be good at something else. And generally speaking, I especially don't buy into it when it comes to writers switching genres.

I'm also a big fan of Joanne Harris's books, with *Chocolat* being an all-time favorite novel, though I'm fond of them all, from

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The Coastliners to *Five Quarters of the Orange* and on.

But with all that said, I still approached this new Harris novel with a bit of trepidation. That's because *Runemarks* is a secondary world high fantasy and that kind of book is hard to do right even if you work in the genre. Anyone who thinks it's easy, that you just "make it all up," has never given it a try, because not only do you have to utilize all the skills learned in other forms of storytelling (plotting, characterization, decent prose), you also have to be able to create a believable setting and a self-contained magic system/mythology.

Adding to the challenge that Harris presented herself is that she based her novel on Norse myth. Let's face it: just like stories based on Celtic and Arthurian matter, this is a background that has been pretty much run into the ground and then beaten to death with big fat books presenting such watered-down versions of its origin that the kindest thing to do would be to give it a proper burial, walk away, and ask for a moratorium on using such material for, oh, let's say, a hundred years.

It's a good thing people like Harris don't listen to me, since *Runemarks* turns out to be a fresh and invigorating novel, using its Norse background with respect and an obvious understanding of the original material.

The book takes place five hundred years after Ragnarók: the end of the world, according to the *Voluspá*, when the gods have all died. But it seems that the middle world — our world, or at least Harris's version of it — is still around, and so are the gods, albeit in diminished form. Those who are still mobile, at any rate.

How's that? Well, as in life, it's because stories never really end.

So while the world where the gods ruled has passed away, as was foretold in the prophesies, out of its ruin another world stumbles on — this one ruled by the Order who follow the Good Book which outlaws dreaming and imagination and especially those born with the mark of an old rune on their skin.

Our viewpoint into this world is through Maddy Smith, an outsider in a village of otherwise ordinary people. She was born with the defect of a "ruin-mark" on her palm, though her one friend, the itinerant traveler known as One-Eye, considers it a mark of destiny and has been teaching her about the uses of runes and other magic. It's a good thing, too, because while doing a favor for

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One-Eye by fetching something for him inside the goblin-ridden Red Horse Hill, she soon finds herself involved in a deadly struggle between the old gods and the new One God of the Order.

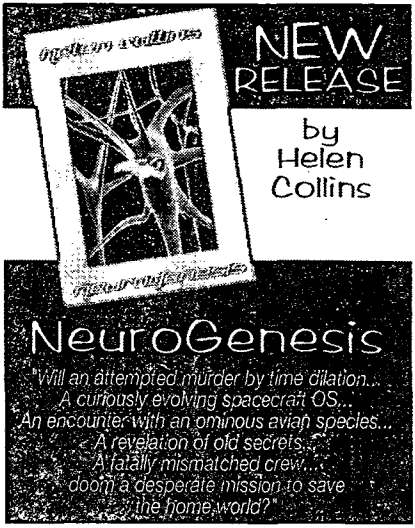
Harris's old gods are wonderfully realized. Woden, Loki, Hel, Thor...they're both as we imagined them, and less and more. They have nobility and flaws, they try to do the right thing and think only of themselves. They are, in other words, much like you and me, but still strangely, and wholly different.

Stylistically, Harris's prose is that perfect fantasy blend of anywhen — by which I mean, in ten, twenty, thirty years, it won't feel dated, in the same way that the work of many of the masters in the field doesn't date, though the books might have been written fifty years ago.

Add to that a charming viewpoint character, a reinvented old mythology that feels exactly right, complicated plot twists and character motivations, and you have a timeless book that will appeal to readers of all ages.

Highly recommended.

Heroes Volume One, by Aron Eli Coleite, Joe Pokaski & various artists, DC Comics, 2007, $29.99.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When I was a kid (bear with me — this isn't going to be a diss of how things are now) we only had a couple of TV channels, both of which went off the air some time between midnight and two A.M. There weren't many cool shows, and when you got spin-offs like comics or novelizations, they were usually pretty lame and had no connection to the show's continuity.

Fast forward a whole bunch of years and now not only do we have what seems like a kazillion channels, but whole seasons of shows are available on DVD to buy or

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rent. (Since videotapes had yet to be invented, I couldn't even imagine this as a kid. If you really were hooked on a show, you had to make sure you were home when it aired, otherwise you'd probably never see it again.)

And best of all, spin-offs don't have to be lame anymore. Sometimes they're as good as the original show, adding to the mythology.

Such as in this recent collection of illustrated short strips that originally appeared on the Web. Collected together in this lovely hardcover volume, they form links between the first season's episodes, or provide more back story than there was room to air in the actual individual shows. The quality of the art ranges between okay to great, but the stories and writing are all wonderfully inventive, gripping, and often moving.

Quiet a feat, really, considering each piece is only around seven pages long.

I know that after the initial love affair many people had with this show, the shine has worn off when it comes to the second season. Personally, I've been enjoying it as much as the first, even if the last couple of episodes felt a bit rushed. But at least creator Tim Kring made sure we got somewhat of an ending before the writer's strike killed the possibility of new shows.

(And just to be clear, while I miss getting new episodes of favorite shows, I'm all for the "talent" getting its fair share of subsequent sales of DVDs and whatever the next medium to sell this material might be. Shame on the producers for being so greedy and forgetting that without the writers, they wouldn't have product in the first place. But I digress.)

If you're a *Heroes* fan jonesing for new material, give this book a try. You won't be disappointed. And while you're in the book or comic store picking it up, have a look around. There's lots more great entertainment available on the shelves to get you through a dry period of no new TV shows. It's all in this clever portable medium called *books*....

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

ELIZABETH HAND

The Shadow Year, by Jeffrey Ford, William Morrow, 2008, $25.95.

"Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies," wrote the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay; "Nobody that matters, that is." Jeffrey Ford's beautiful new novel, *The Shadow Year*, is an account of childhood's kingdom under siege, a book so achingly lovely and, yes, profound, that one longs to call it a masterpiece. Only it seems a bit unfair to burden an author at mid-career with such a weight.

So I'll qualify that intro by saying *The Shadow Year* is superb, heartbreaking, and masterfully written; in its way, as perfect an evocation of the mystery and hilarity and terror that is American childhood as Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, or Jean Shepherd's *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*, with flickers here and there of David Sedaris's black humor and the frightening fever-dream of Charles Laughton's great movie adaptation of Davis Grubb's *Night of the Hunter*.

An expansion of Ford's novella "Botch Town," which won the 2007 World Fantasy Award, *The Shadow Year* begins and ends with the last days of summer, the bittersweet halcyon season that marks the true beginning of a child's year, far more than the random, grownup assignation of January 1. In this I detect a nod to Fellini's *Amarcord*, the filmmaker's funny, melancholy reverie of his own childhood. *The Shadow Year* has much in common with Amarcord. The movie's title translates as "I remember," and Fellini completed it when he was just past fifty, the same age as Ford is now. Like *Amarcord*, *The Shadow Year* conflates the everyday and the supernatural; overheard adult conversations that take on a gilded patina of legend and the profane, no-bullshit exchanges of kids when they know grownups aren't listening.

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The narrator of Ford's tale is the middle of three siblings, suffering through sixth grade in a small Long Island town in the early 1960s. As in "Botch Town," he is never given a name, but it's difficult not to identify him with the author — two of the book's three dedicatees bear the same names as the narrator's siblings — which makes the novel's balancing act of memory and magic all the more impressive. The plot is simple and, by now, familiar to any reader of late-twentieth-century popular fiction: a small town is threatened by a serial killer who preys on both children and adults. The killer, dubbed Mr. White by the protagonist and his older brother, Jim, possesses near-supernatural attributes we've seen before, usually in Stephen King novels — distinctive car (older model, shiny white, tail-finned), distinctive clothing (long white trench coat and hat), unsettling ability to detect the presence of hidden children while seeming to remain invisible to adults. Mr. White is real, though — he attempts to abduct one kid and murders another, and also kills an adult neighbor. But is he the same person as the mysterious Peeping Tom who is glimpsed by various folks throughout the novel?

Mr. White's depredations are eerily foreshadowed in Botch Town, a makeshift basement model of the children's hometown, built of discarded toys, Matchbox cars, and other junk by older brother Jim, and inhabited by toy figures the three siblings name after their real-life counterparts. Mary, the youngest child, is able to predict where Mr. White will strike next, and this concession to the mechanics of supernatural fiction gives *The Shadow Year* a passing similarity to works like King's *Hearts in Atlantis*, the stories in Joe Hill's *20th Century Ghosts*, and in particular Glen Hirshberg's spooky, underrated *The Snowman's Children*.

Yet *The Shadow Year* is better than all of these, because it is a more nuanced, far more delicate novel. "Delicate" seems an odd word to describe a book wherein Sherlock Holmes appears as a leitmotif, described thus: "The great detective came across to me like a snob, the type my father once described as 'believing that the sun rose and set from his asshole;' " or where the narrator has this encounter with his grandparents —

> On the TV, Hercules was lifting a giant boulder. Pop was awake now, reading a magazine. He

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saw I was also awake and said, "You shouldn't watch this junk," nodding toward the television. "You should read a magazine. It's educational. See?" he said, and turned the magazine in his hands so I could see the page he was on. There was no writing, just a picture of a naked woman sitting on the lap of a guy in a gorilla suit. I could feel my face flush. Nan looked over and laughed. "Put that away," she said.

The characterization of the narrator's family is so dead-on it almost hurts to read, caught between heartbreak and laughing out loud — Jim's severe, don't-argue-with-me pronouncements on topics such as school projects and the hierarchy of Halloween candy (Milky Ways at the top, home-baked goods at the bottom); the unsparing, deeply loving depiction of their mother's alcoholism; Mary's odd powers and imaginary friends, evidence of an acute imagination that seems as though it might veer into a more frightening adult psychological disorder; the narrator's casual yet deeply felt discovery that he likes to write in a notebook — all take on the buoyant gravitas of a modern classic being born, right there on the page.

Because what Ford does in *The Shadow Year* is capture childhood the way it really is, starlight that reaches us a million miles away, in adulthood, all the more fragile and breathtaking because we know we're seeing something that is gone forever. G. K. Chesterton, another laureate of the magical mundane, wrote "What is loved becomes *immediately* what can be lost"; and *The Shadow Year* is both celebration of and memento mori for a kind of American childhood that doesn't exist anymore, except in fiction.

It did once, though. I can attest to that, having grown up in a time and place not far removed from the setting of *The Shadow Year*. But Ford's book isn't an exercise in Baby Boomer nostalgia. It's far too hard-headed for that, far too blackly funny; far too real, even as Ford plainly stakes his claim to a home-grown surrealism as distinctive as David Lynch's, as when their mother takes the three children to see a grimy circus, complete with sideshow, camped outside town —

Even I wanted to see the Blood-Sweating Hippo, but we turned and walked away. My mother

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bought us cotton candy — plumes of blue wrapped in a paper cone. The first bite was like eating hair, until it suddenly melted into straight sugar....

We made our way to a circular enclosure and peered over the walls. There was a lightbulb above the ring that lit the slick hide of the hippo. The creature lay there, in straw sodden with its own piss, huge and unmoving. All it did was breathe. We stared at it as long as we could. Then Jim picked Mary up and held her so she could see. She pointed to the edge of the enclosure at something I hadn't noticed before. There was a track that went around the rim of the circle, and on it was a turtle. A few seconds later, she pointed to another spot, and there was a rabbit.

"The tortoise and the hare," said my mother.

"What does that have to do with a hippo?" I asked.

"Ask the midget," she said.

The Shadow Year plays out across a year in realtime, kid-time. The big events include murders, that attempted abduction, and a haunting, but they're played out against the things that really matter when you're eleven years old: Halloween, Christmas, beating up the kid who beat you up first, a long, unplanned afternoon with your father, listening to grownups talk when they think you're asleep. Ford's narrative isn't leisurely so much as oneiric. I finished this book as though waking from a long dream, like Alice returned from Looking-Glass World; trying to puzzle out which parts were real, which invented; what had actually happened to me forty years ago and what I had only just read about. It's proof of Jeffrey Ford's narrative power that, ultimately, the distinction doesn't much matter. His made-up world trumps ours all hollow.

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S. L. Gilbow is making a reputation for himself as a storyteller with a sharp eye for social commentary — several critics marked him as a writer to watch after reading his stories "Who Brought Tulips to the Moon?" (Dec. 2007) and "Red Card" (Feb. 2007). His new story is lighter in tone, but just as keenly observant of how technology tends to change human lives.

Rebecca's Locket

By S. L. Gilbow

ON A NOVEMBER FRIDAY morning, Jerry Morgan attended his funeral at the Cotton Springs Methodist Church. It wasn't a bad funeral. His daughter, Jill, flew her Cessna in from Saint Louis, and his son, Buddy, drove up from El Paso six hours away. The townspeople of Cotton Springs turned out in good numbers too, solemnly filing into the old, brick church, filling all the pews except for a few closest to the front. Cotton Springs was a small, close-knit community where funerals tended to draw good crowds.

The service proceeded much as Jerry had planned. Jennifer Garland, the church organist for twenty-one years, started out with "How Great Thou Art." She bobbed her head in rhythm to the music, striking each key with precision, artfully working the pedals with her feet. Jennifer hit her final B-flat with the left heel of her patent leather Mary Janes and held it as Jill and Buddy somberly marched to the front of the church, stood behind the coffin, and began to sing: "Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium."

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This surprised Jerry. He had planned for Jill and Buddy to sing "I'll Fly Away." But here they were, bold and passionate, making their way through "Ode to Joy," Jerry's favorite song. Jerry had learned to sing it in German while in the Army, and belted it out around the house whenever he was in a good mood.

"Wir betreten feuertrunken, Himmlische, dein Heiligtum," whispered Jerry. Jill sang with a passable German accent she learned at Texas Tech, but Buddy butchered his vowels with a thick west-Texas drawl. But the song was beautiful. It was always beautiful.

After Jill and Buddy finished singing and stepped away from the coffin, Reverend Hackam ambled to the podium and began to talk about what a wonderful person Jerry had been for the past sixty-eight years, about how well he had treated his neighbors, about what fine contributions Jerry and his small store, Grocery Delite, had made to this humble community. Jerry agreed with almost everything the reverend said but disliked the dry, monotonous way he said it.

"Jerry was a fine man," droned Reverend Hackam, "a good person to have known." Jerry had hoped for a little more enthusiasm.

The spray of roses on top of Jerry's coffin bothered him too. Jerry and Rebecca had talked about the funeral in great detail two weeks before Jerry died. She had come to his hospital room late one night, knowing Jerry didn't have much time left. Rebecca didn't want to talk about death or dying, but Jerry brought up the subject. He usually avoided serious topics, but this was one thing he wanted to discuss. He told her how he pictured the funeral. He talked about songs and singers. He selected his casket from a newspaper ad for Hank Jenson's Funeral Home down on Austin Street, picking out the deluxe oak coffin with thin silver bands that ran around it like racing stripes. Finally, Jerry asked for red flowers. He loved his ruby-red Ford pick-up truck and hoped red roses might remind everybody of it.

But the flowers on top of Jerry's coffin weren't red. They were yellow — as yellow as canaries.

"Why the yellow flowers?" asked Jerry, gazing at his oak coffin.

"They were out of red roses," whispered Rebecca. "Now be quiet."

"I would have settled for carnations."

"Shhh!"

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"You're the only one who can hear me," said Jerry. Rebecca had been short with Jerry all morning, and he was growing tired of it.

"We're in a church," said Rebecca. "We're in the middle of a funeral." She was having trouble getting used to Jerry being in two places at once — in the casket and around her neck.

"I guess the yellow flowers are okay," said Jerry.

"They're fine," said Rebecca, trying to be patient. She had been listening to Jerry through an earpiece that ran from her right ear to a gold locket hanging over the center of her chest. And that's where Jerry was — in the locket. Well, not exactly in the locket — Jerry was the locket.

THINGS CAME SLOWLY to Cotton Springs. When Martha Jenson brought the first washing machine to town in 1926, Frank Hapsen acted as if the whole world might come to an end. "Ain't got no use for that kind of thing around here," he would say whenever anyone would listen to him. But the world didn't come to an end, and Frank's wife, Mary, washed his shirts by hand until he died in 1937. Then she bought a washing machine.

And so over the past one hundred years technology crept into Cotton Springs. Always slowly. Usually grudgingly. But it always came. Washing machines, telephones, cameras, radios, televisions, hot air popcorn poppers, microwave ovens, computers, and cell phones all worked their way out of Fort Worth, down Interstate 20 to the west, and over the state highway into Cotton Springs.

It was no surprise when the Eternilocket finally came to town as well. By the time it got to Cotton Springs, the rest of the country had already played around with it for five years and was beginning to grow bored.

When Infinite Electronics came out with the Eternilocket, people were fascinated with the idea of downloading a person's personality and memories into a locket. The locket could be brought out to help the next of kin get through the grieving process. It was also pretty handy when you couldn't find the will.

However, many people complained that the lockets just didn't capture the beloved's true personality. Others pointed out that they never seemed to get the voice quite right. A few just grew tired of arguing with

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jewelry. By the time the Eternilocket came to Cotton Springs, by the time Jerry Morgan had one programmed at his hospital bed less than a week away from dying, almost all the rest of the country was done with it.

"And, of course, Jerry was more concerned with the mule's hoof than his own head," said Reverend Hackam. Laughter rose from the crowd, that quiet respectful kind of laughter you occasionally hear at weddings, funerals, and fancy restaurants.

"That's not really how it happened," said Jerry. The mule story had been going around for about ten years now, and it seemed to change a little every time someone told it.

"Hush," said Rebecca.

"I got kicked in the shoulder," said Jerry. "It was nowhere near my head."

"It doesn't matter," said Rebecca.

"And Jerry was a passionate man," continued the reverend.

Passionate? thought Jerry. That wasn't really how he would have described himself.

"We all know how much Jerry loved his wife, Rebecca." Jerry could sense himself dip as Rebecca bowed her head. "And of course we all know that Jerry loved Jacks," said the reverend.

Jerry brightened at the mention of Jacks. He had even wanted Rebecca to bring Jacks to the funeral, but Rebecca had refused, saying it would be silly to let a dog into a church.

"You really should have let me bring him," said Jerry.

Rebecca grasped the locket and dug the small red jewel, Jerry's eyes in a sense, into the palm of her hand, squeezing hard.

"I can't see!" shouted Jerry.

"You going to be quiet?" asked Rebecca.

"All right," said Jerry.

"Not a word," whispered Rebecca, releasing Jerry from her grasp. He dropped to his place between her breasts.

"All right," said Jerry. He paused. He didn't intend to say another word, but he couldn't resist. "I know Jacks would have been good."

"That's it!" shouted Rebecca as Jerry sank into darkness.

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When Jerry came to, he heard barking, low and muffled, coming from another room. He thought Rebecca had brought him home but, looking straight up at the ceiling, couldn't be certain. After a few seconds, he recognized a gaping crack in the corner molding, a crack Rebecca had begged him to fix many times, and knew Rebecca had laid him on the dresser in their bedroom.

"Rebecca!" shouted Jerry. He no longer spoke through the earpiece, and his voice, strong and metallic, almost like shouting into a frying pan, startled him. "Rebecca," he said softer.

"Yes?"

She was close. Of course, she had to be close. Jerry couldn't have switched himself back on.

"What are you doing?"

"Jerry, this isn't going to work," said Rebecca.

"Of course it is," said Jerry, still disoriented, still gazing up at the ceiling. "Just put me on again. We can talk."

Jerry hadn't been much of a talker when he was alive. He could do small talk, but he usually avoided serious conversation. Serious talking was one of those things he occasionally endured to keep his marriage going. But now, since he no longer had legs or arms — or even a torso or head for that matter — his choice of activities was extremely limited.

"Please," he pleaded. "Just put me on for a little while and then we can talk."

Jerry's view spun around wildly as Rebecca lifted him off the dresser and fastened the locket's thin chain around her neck. When Jerry stopped spinning, he found himself looking in a mirror, looking at Rebecca, looking at a gold locket engraved with tiny flowers. In the center of the locket sat a glassy red jewel. *I'm actually a little gaudy*, he thought.

Jacks scratched at the bedroom door, barking loudly. He was a large golden retriever, usually calm and quiet. Jerry had owned dogs for almost his entire life, but favored Jacks over all the rest.

"Can I see Jacks?" asked Jerry.

"He won't recognize you," said Rebecca. "And he's kind of excited today."

"We can at least try."

Rebecca opened the door. Jacks dashed in, arced around her and

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emitted a low guttural sound, not quite a growl. Jerry thought Jacks was a beautiful dog. Not perfect. Certainly not a show dog. His shoulders stood too high and his head was too broad. He had a pink nose and a thick, dark coat. Rebecca backed away slowly as Jacks, tail wagging, body shifting from side to side, jumped closer.

"I told you," she said. She turned to look out the open bedroom window thinking that if she ignored Jacks he might settle down. Jerry looked out the window too but could still see Jacks at the edge of his vision.

"Jacks!" said Jerry. That usually quieted him.

Jacks dipped his head for a second, regained his courage and barked again.

"Get back," said Jerry. Jacks took one step back and sank obediently to the floor.

"We need to talk, Jerry," said Rebecca.

As Jerry looked out the bedroom window, he could see the neighbor's cat skulking about next to the large cottonwood tree at the end of the alley. She was a large gray beast Jerry and Jacks had grown to dislike. She always seemed to be sneaking onto the Morgans' property to prowl through the garbage cans at the back of the house.

"Cat!" shouted Jerry. Jacks jumped once, turned and dashed downstairs. Jerry heard the pet door slap open and close and watched Jacks race into the yard outside. The cat, always expecting danger to be somewhere close, sprang up the cottonwood tree.

Jacks won't get her today, thought Jerry. Jerry and Rebecca were alone now.

"Jerry, this isn't going to work," said Rebecca, returning to the mirror so she could look at Jerry as she spoke.

"What do you mean?"

"Jerry is dead," she said.

"I'm right here."

"No, you're not," she said, her voice quavering. "It's not the same."

Jerry didn't know what to say. He felt the same. Or at least he thought he did. How could he really be sure?

"It's not the same," Rebecca said again.

"It's all right," said Jerry. "It'll just take some getting used to."

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"Getting used to? Getting used to what? Getting used to you hanging around my neck all the time?"

"I *am* kind of limited in moving about," said Jerry.

"It's over, Jerry. I hung with you for forty-two years, but it's over."

"Don't," said Jerry.

Rebecca stared into the mirror, stared into her own brown eyes. She had shoulder-length gray hair and smooth, olive skin, except for a tiny scar on her left cheek. "I was there for you, Jerry." She didn't seem to be addressing Jerry at all now. "I was there when you joined the Army. I was there when you came home." Her face was strong and her voice tense. "I was there when you tried to open that store with almost no money. I was there to raise two kids with you. I was there to take care of you when you were dying." She started to cry. "I was there as cancer was eating you up. I was there, Jerry. I was there."

"I know," said Jerry. He didn't know what else to say. Rebecca stared past Jerry, looking at herself, deep into herself.

"What now?" asked Jerry. He had heard stories of lockets being tossed into the trash while they were still on. Infinite Electronics strongly discouraged that, even printing a banner on the Eternilocket directions: PLEASE TURN LOCKETS OFF BEFORE DISCARDING. Rebecca followed directions. She would turn Jerry off before tossing him into the garbage. At least that gave Jerry some consolation. "What's going to happen now?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Rebecca.

Jerry was quiet. Even a little afraid. He had never felt so powerless.

THE GRAY CAT SANK low to the ground and stretched her plump body out as far as she could. She smelled fish coming from the garbage behind the large house next door. She had made many a fine meal on what she had found in that part of the alley, but it was always dangerous work, demanding her utmost concentration. She moved slowly, almost imperceptibly.

As she drew closer to the garbage cans, as they loomed over her, the smell of fish grew strong, almost overwhelming. Fish. Fish. It wouldn't be much longer. She held her pace, creeping along, barely moving.

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"Here, Kitty!" A voice. A voice was near.

The gray cat froze, determined she was safe, and then turned her head slowly, looking for a human to go with the voice. She looked at the discarded lettuce hanging out of the cans; she looked up and down the alley; she looked at the azalea bushes framing the back of the large house. No one was there. She had been chased away from garbage cans by people many times before, but there had always been a body to go with the voice. But there was no body now, so she went back to sniffing about. As a rule, humans weren't much of a threat, tending to be slow and clumsy.

"Kitty!" said the voice.

The gray cat looked around again, finding nothing. Nothing. She resumed her search for food and discovered a tuna can, still half full, had fallen on the ground. She lowered herself until her stomach scraped the gravel underneath her and approached the can as if it were some kind of wild prey.

"Now!" shouted the voice. The cat turned to the sound as a large dog charged out of the bushes near the back of the house and bore down on her. She had been through this many times before.

"Faster!" came the voice. The cat flipped around and sprinted as fast as she could.

"Hurry!" cried the voice. The cat had been chased many times before. A few dogs had even come close to catching her, but humans had never kept up until now. The cat raced for the cottonwood tree at the end of alley, her place of refuge. The dog grew close, but the cat darted left, then right, throwing the dog off his pace. As she leapt onto the tree, the gray cat looked behind her and saw something swinging under the dog's neck. It was gold and red and it was singing now: "Freude, schöner Götterfunken, Tochter aus Elysium!"

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Rachel Pollack is the author of Godmother Night, Temporary Agency, *and* Unquenchable Fire. *She is the author of several Tarot decks including a surreal deck,* See of Logos, *that is due to be published soon, along with a new collection of short stories entitled* The Tarot of Perfection.

In her blog at rachelpollack.wordpress.com, *Ms. Pollack said recently that a lot of people use the word "myth" to refer to old stories that have no reality, but she prefers to use the word to mean "a story that has an inner truth that cannot be put into simple explanations." You'll find that definition, and an awareness of the power of story, at play in this gorgeous new fantasy.*

Immortal Snake

By Rachel Pollack

LONG AGO, IN A TIME beyond memory, Great Powers owned the land, the water, and even the air. Of all these empires, the strongest was a land called Written in the Sky. The soldiers of this land, who called themselves the Army of Heaven, traveled in rolling multi-level engines covered in sheets of black glass so that pillars of darkness moved across the earth.

And yet, despite the strengths of its forces, the true power of the country lay in the wisdom of a group called Readers, priests trained to follow the tracks of heaven known as God's writing in the sky. The priests lived in an observatory called the Kingdom of God, high above the palace of the country's ruler. Every night they watched and calculated the slow movements of the stars, and the swifter movements of the planets. If any clouds dared to obscure the night, the Readers let loose their white bulls, whose bellows of rage cleared the air of rebellious vapors.

Through their perfect knowledge the Readers could tell the Army of Heaven where to strike, or the owners of mines where to dig for copper or

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gold, or the creators of spectacles what grand images of beauty and desire would entice audiences to love them and long for them.

Most of all, however, the Readers studied the sky for the greatest of all messages, the secret that caused the finger of heaven to stroke Written in the Sky with power — the death of its ruler.

Though the merchants and slave traders managed the empire's wealth, and the Army commanded obedience, all power officially belonged to the ruler who lived in a palace in the central circle of a city called The Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth. The name of this man was always the same, no matter who it was that sat on the Throne of Lilies. They called him Immortal Snake.

During the time of his reign, each Immortal Snake enjoyed more delights than any single person could imagine. Whole teams of people worked beyond exhaustion to devise new pleasures for him to experience. And everyone loved him. Every house contained portraits of him, and figurines to set above the bed, and there were statues in even the smallest towns. Children were taught to write letters to him, grateful for his love and protection. In every wedding the bride swore love to Immortal Snake and then her husband, who in turn declared himself a stand-in for the beauty and devotion of the ruler.

And yet, all of it, all the adulation and the pleasure, could end at any moment. For as the Readers insisted, it was only the willing death of the Snake — the "shedding of the skin" — that convinced God of the country's worthiness.

No one knew when it would happen, but a night would come when all the stars and planets locked into place. Then the Readers would put on their purple hoods and march through the city, blowing copper trumpets blackened by age, and driving their herds of white bulls maddened by loneliness, through the streets of The Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth. All through the city people doused their fires, even the lanterns in their kitchens, and then locked themselves in rooms without windows or chairs.

At the beginning of his reign each Immortal Snake chose a male and female "companion," two people who served only one function. They died first. The Readers alone knew the exact manner of their death, but their hearts and lungs and genitals went into a dish cooked in a stone pot.

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Every Immortal Snake knew something very simple. If he wanted to live he must resist the food the Readers brought to him. It was so easy. But lights flashed in the bubbles of steam; and the smell excited tiny explosions all up and down his tongue; finally, like every Immortal Snake before him, he would tell himself that just a taste, just a drop, could not possibly harm him.

When he had eaten the entire dish he would begin to vomit. All his insides would pour out, even his bones, which the food had turned to brightly colored jelly. When nothing but the skin remained the Readers would drape it over a wooden cross they then would carry through the city back to the vaults underneath their observatory. And then, from the directions written in the sky, they would choose a new Immortal Snake. And everyone would celebrate.

In front of the Kingdom of God the Readers would hoe a small patch of earth, into which the new Immortal Snake would plant a seedling tree. As the tree grew the people would take seeds from it to plant in their own villages, a promise that they would never go hungry. When the new Snake in turn would shed his skin the priests would uproot the tree, then prepare the ground for the next planting.

So it happened once again, after so many times. The man who had ruled for a span of years and months that no one was allowed to count (for according to doctrine there was only one Immortal Snake, and his reign was eternal) vanished into a torn skin flapping on sticks. A new ruler emerged, a young man called Happier Than the Day Before. When the Readers came to tell him of his ascension he shouted with joy, for he could hardly imagine all the gifts and pleasures that would pour into his life at every moment. When they left him he stood on tiptoe, stretched his arms out to the sides, and spun around until he fell down laughing. "Immortal Snake," he said out loud. "I'm Immortal Snake. I'm the ruler of the world!"

And indeed, over the next weeks countless marvels and delights arrived from all the lands that owed tribute to Written in the Sky. There were carpets woven from the wings of butterflies. There were bottles of wine sprinkled with the tears of old women remembering the kiss of the first person who'd ever loved them. Performers and teachers from every level came to entertain and instruct the new ruler. Hermits who'd sealed

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themselves in caves for half a century reported on what the shapes of stalactites taught them about human longing. People marched in and announced they'd committed atrocities just so they could come to The Nine Rings and recount all the details to Immortal Snake, who laughed as he pretended to cover his eyes in horror. Poets who'd been torn apart by wild dogs and then brought back to life as babies floating on the sea arrived to solve any riddle anyone had ever devised.

The spectacle lasted fifteen days, and in all this time only two things wounded the Snake's pleasure. The first was his minister, a man with pinched features named Breath of Judgment, who insisted that Immortal Snake consider his duties, a subject that did not interest the new ruler in the slightest. As far as Immortal Snake could tell, these duties consisted primarily in choosing his male and female companions. And *that* was a subject he did not want to think about at all.

The second annoyance was his sister, an unpleasant young woman named More Clever Than Her Father and Everyone Else. Even before her brother's glorious rise the woman had always done everything to make him feel impure and trivial. She would never go to any of his parties, never laugh at his jokes, never accept the boys he chose for her. She ate only the simplest foods, drank only the smallest sips of wine, and spent her days studying ancient texts, or writing poetry, or designing elegant furniture, or filling the walls of her rooms with murals depicting the mysteries of Creation. She wore long dark dresses buttoned to the neck (though they always contained streaks or panels of intense color), and shoes made of flat soles and worn leather straps that wound round and round her ankles. When her brother and his friends staged elaborate parties, More Clever Than Her Father would trace her way through the Nine Rings until she emerged into the desert. There she would spend hours watching tiny creatures scurry back and forth to no purpose.

And now that her brother had ascended to his glory, the woman strode into the throne room, rudely ignored all the acrobats, contortionists, and life-size wind-up giraffes, and simply demanded that he use the power of Immortal Snake to raise the lives of the poor and helpless.

Her smugness made him want to jump off the throne and tear her hair out. But then a better idea came to him. With a smirk he turned to Breath of Judgment. "Good news!" he said. "I've chosen my female companion."

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More Clever stepped back. "No!" she said. "Don't say it. There's still time. You can stop."

Slowly, her brother shook his head so that his wide grin swept all across her. He said, "I choose my sister, More Clever Than Her Father and Everyone Else, to accompany me through all the worlds as my female companion." And then, because it sounded so good, he added, "Blessed forever is Immortal Snake."

More Clever said nothing, only marched out past the laughter of all the courtiers who hoped to become the ruler's special friend. She went to her bedroom, where she pulled out a small wooden trunk from under her bed. Shaking, she took out the strands of hair from her first haircut, done at her name enactment, along with the pale blue dress she'd worn, and the black doll in a gold dress her mother had given her as a present after the ceremony. She put these in a basket and took them to the farthest ring of the city, where a small stone building inside the walls housed the Temple of Names.

The Name priests, who all wore oversize masks carved with letters from alphabets nobody remembered, feared she might produce a dead baby from inside that basket and demand they give it a name. But the new companion to Immortal Snake only dumped her relics on the rough stone floor. "My name no longer belongs to me," she said. "I want you to take it back."

The priests tried to talk her out of it. To go without a name, they said, meant that no one could bless her when they cast stones into the Well of Life. Even her dreams would not be able to find her. She suspected what really troubled them: the enactment to remove a name required the priests to inscribe the offensive words on inedible cakes that they would have to eat so that the name would pass through their bodies and be expelled to oblivion. She said, "I don't intend to go without a name. I've found a new one. My name now is Broken by Heaven."

Sitting on the Throne of Lilies, Immortal Snake (once known as Happier Than the Day Before) continued to applaud his parade of gifts. He'd begun to open some of the rarer bottles of wine, and when the minister would ask for a decision on the male companion, the Snake would hold out the bottle as if to offer it, then take a long swallow.

At last the great show came to an end. Only one figure remained, a

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slave by the look of his knotted hair, his clothes that were little more than a binding cloth and a tunic tied at the waist with a red rope. But he was tall and graceful, with deep eyes and long hands, and a wide strong mouth. Immortal Snake glanced at the sheet of gifts prepared by his Office of Numbers, but all he could see at the very bottom was "slave." He said, "Where do you come from?"

"Great Lord," the slave said, "I come from the Emperor of Mud and Glory." Immortal Snake smiled. The Land of Mud and Glory was a rival of Written in the Sky, but even they could not deny him his gifts.

He said, "And your name? Does your emperor allow you a name?"

"Great Lord, my name is Tribute of Angels."

"Wonderful," the ruler said. "We're making progress. Now. Tell me what treasures you bring me from Mud and Glory."

Tribute of Angels cast down his eyes. He said, "I bring no treasure, Great Lord. I myself am the gift."

Snake half rose from his throne. "A slave? Has he lost his imperial mud mind? Would he like his cities filled with the Army of Heaven?"

The minister touched the ruler's arm. "Lord," he said, "perhaps the slave carries some treasure inside his body. The formula for gold written on his bones, or a treaty hidden in his belly."

But the slave shook his head. "Your forgiveness, Great Lord. My body contains nothing more precious than blood."

The minister, fearful his ruler might order a slave's blood poured out onto the sacred floor, said quickly, "Then some talent? Some wondrous skill? What can you do, slave? What knowledge or power do you bring us?"

Tribute of Angels raised his eyes. Their dark light shone into the face of the world's most beloved and hated man. "Great Lord," he said. "I tell stories."

There was a long silence and then Immortal Snake laughed loudly. "Stories!" he said. "Wonderful." And then the Living World of Heaven inserted an idea into his head. A joke. He turned to his minister and said, "You want me to choose a companion? There. Tribute of Angels will be my companion."

"Lord!" Breath of Judgment cried. "The creature is a slave!"

"Ah, but he can tell stories. On those long boring nights when you and all the others are off making lists, or whatever you do, my *companion* can

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tell me a story." He laughed again. "What better companion can a snake have than a storyteller?"

IN THE LAND of Written in the Sky there was no recording of time. Immortal Snake was the Living World's extension into the world of death, a finger from the Great Above stroking the Great Below, and just as the Living World was forever and unchanging, so was Immortal Snake. He existed always, only shedding his skin when God's writing in the stars and planets told the Readers to bring the Snake to renewal. Immortal Snake was forever, and there was no before and after.

Still, time passed, or at least turned, and lesser creatures grew old and died, and the seasons replaced each other, and the Sun would return after a number of days to the same place in the sky. Though the years were not numbered their length was understood, 360 days, just like the 360 degrees of the circle, for wasn't Immortal Snake, like heaven, a great circle without beginning or end? In between the years there were five extra days, placed there by the Living World to allow people a moment outside their duties. Every four years there would be another day before the Sun could return to its place, but nothing that happened that day was ever written down, and so it did not exist.

In this manner of counting, three years passed, 1080 days plus fifteen extra, plus one that no one would remember. Through all this, Immortal Snake celebrated his power. Every night he hosted elaborate parties, with teams of competing chefs from countries conquered by the Army of Heaven. Sometimes the parties featured dramas of the Snake's glory, or paeans to his sexual potency. The guests, who often included heads of state, were given costumes to wear, or assigned various comical tasks, such as the imitation of farm animals.

During the days Immortal Snake usually slept late, and when awake would sometimes fidget, or yell at his slaves or advisors. In the early days he liked to stare at the crowns and jeweled swords presented at his ascendancy, or play with the puppets or mechanical animals given along with the more traditional gifts. Over time, however, these things began to bore him. He even tired of the slave girls' adoration and turned, to everyone's surprise, to his ministers, and the dry voices he used to

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ridicule. He began to ask questions and every now and then make suggestions. Then, at night, satisfied with his contributions, he would give himself to parties.

In this same period Broken by Heaven stayed almost entirely within her official rooms in the second ring of the Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth. She'd painted gray paint over the murals that once filled the walls, she'd removed the lacquered tables, the carved chairs, the gold and enamel plates, the bed that had stood high in the room under a canopy painted with clouds. Heaven had broken her and she'd ordered the bed destroyed, replaced with a simple mattress on a low wooden platform. She would eat only the plainest food, boiled vegetables and rice without sauce, served on lumpy white plates.

Every morning the young women who attended her laid out elaborate dresses for her in hope that some heroic god might have entered her dreams to drive away the demons who had possessed her ever since her brother had become Immortal Snake. She ignored them and dressed only in white, the color of emptiness.

And Tribute of Angels? The storyteller who was simultaneously slave and companion to the Ruler of the World spent his days alone, in a small chamber at the edge of the slave quarters. No work was assigned to him, hardly anyone spoke to him. Sometimes at evening, the slaves who collected rainwater from the cisterns on the roof would see him standing on the edge of the world, his face as empty as the sky.

Three years passed, and then one night the Living World placed two thoughts in the head of Immortal Snake.

The first was this: *I'm going to die.* The trumpets would blare in the night, the people would lock themselves in their windowless rooms, the bulls would run through the streets, and then the Readers would feed him that stew of death that no Immortal Snake had ever resisted.

He looked around at all his splendor, the ornamental swords he had never learned to use, the jeweled mechanical lions and butterflies, the two beautiful nameless women asleep in his perfumed bed. Useless. All his ministers, useless. The terrible Army of Heaven, useless. They too would hide their faces, they would shut away their black engines of war, for when the Readers declared that God's writing in the Sky demanded the skin of the Snake, nobody challenged them.

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That was the first thought. The second one was this: *That storyteller. My companion. Maybe he can distract me.*

Though the Snake could not remember the storyteller's name, he knew it would be listed as the final gift from the Emperor of Mud and Glory, and of course, as his official companion into death.

Should he summon the slave now? He could wake up his steward, who would wake up the Chief Minister, Breath of Judgment, who would do something or other. No. He decided he wanted to enjoy the story in the proper setting. He went back to bed where he pushed aside the two women so he could stretch out and fall asleep. When he awoke he ordered Breath of Judgment to prepare the storyteller, for that night the gift of Mud and Glory would entertain the Snake and all his court.

It took some time to locate the gift and companion, but at last Tribute of Angels was brought to the inner rings, where the Wardrobe Minister for the Snake's Amusement bathed, oiled, and dressed him. It was a challenge; the minister was not used to dressing men, at least for this version of Immortal Snake. Happily, the slave simply did whatever was asked of him, with a look on his face that was not exactly empty, yet impossible to read. He would say only "The Living World wills it." The minister did his best, and by evening Tribute of Angels was ready to perform his task.

The storyteller arrived in the great Hall of Precious Happiness at the beginning of the feast, when the slaves were about to bring the first dishes and pour the first glasses of wine. Music announced him, reeds and drums and flutes. According to tradition, God gave these to the first musicians when Immortal Snake descended from the Great Above to the Sad Below. Since then, countless musicians had lived and died, servants of the eternal song, for a musician is nothing more than a body in this world of suffering and death, while music itself, like Immortal Snake, is unending, the voice of the Living World. There were no trumpets, however. These belonged to the Readers.

The Snake looked at his Companion and was startled to see how beautiful he was as he stood among the torches. Tribute of Angels was taller than the Snake remembered. His hands were long, with tapered fingers. His hair had been tied in a slave knot the only other time the ruler had seen him; now it was brushed back and decorated with tiny purple stones. Its color was a coppery gold, but there were black strands as well,

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dark streams in a river of light. His face was both strong and delicate, as if angels flowed into his body. He wore a tunic of yellow and blue silk, perfectly fitted yet not too ostentatious for a slave.

For a long time the Snake just stared at that graceful body, that serene face. But then the smell of lamb cooked in figs returned him to his feast, and he laughed happily. "Come," he said, and patted a cushion near his feet. "Come tell us your story."

"Great Lord," his slave and Companion said, "your command is my blessing." He sat down, his back straight, his hands in his lap. Immortal Snake raised his wine glass, painted with peacocks and lions. All the guests raised their glasses at the same time, for it was impolite to drink before Immortal Snake, who waited for the opening words of the story before that first cup of wine would delight his mouth.

Tribute of Angels began to speak, his voice soft yet somehow touching every ear, like perfumed smoke. They listened and closed their eyes, and slowly they put down their glasses and leaned back in their chairs. The slaves stopped serving and sat down on the floor; there was no harm, for no one was eating. The musicians set down their instruments, and everyone closed their eyes and smiled. Tribute of Angels's voice wound through them like the river that once flowed from Paradise until it became lost in the dark woods of human suffering.

It was a tale of a boy and girl who swear their love for each other, only to be separated just as they are about to kiss; separated first by the boy's uncle, for there was no dowry, and then by demons jealous of their beauty. At last, after decades of trials, they find each other in old age and discover that their long-delayed first kiss restores them to the perfect moment of their youth.

Immortal Snake, and all his guests, and his slaves and his musicians and his dancers and his cooks all closed their eyes, and smiled, and floated away. When they opened their eyes again, thinking that a few moments had passed, they discovered it was morning. All the food was cold, and all the wine was dull. It didn't matter. Each one got up and silently left the room, leaving Tribute of Angels on his cushion at the feet of the Snake, his legs underneath him, his back straight, his head slightly bowed, his face serene. For a long time Immortal Snake looked at him, then the Snake too got up and walked alone to his bed.

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The next evening the ruler once more summoned his companion to the Hall of Precious Happiness. "Ah, but tonight," he said, and waved a finger, "you will tell us your tale *after* we have eaten. Otherwise, all our food will rot and we will all become as skinny as slave children taken into the Army of Heaven." He laughed at his own joke and waved his companion to a red cushion at his feet.

"As you wish, Great Lord."

They ate, but quickly, and sipped their wine without the proper intervals to allow the alcohol to flow lazily through their blood. It made no difference. If they were drunk, or dyspeptic, or agitated, or sleepy, that all changed the moment Tribute of Angels began to speak.

He told of the Lover of Wheat, an ancient Goddess who ruled over all the plants and animals that feed the world. The Goddess had a daughter who every morning played among the flowers that sprang up at her approach. One morning the girl saw a shadow on a rock wall, and she found that she could not help but stare at it, until a breeze stirred the flowers, and the movement of color distracted her. The next morning there was the shadow again, and this time it took the form of a man, handsome and tall. Lover of Wheat's daughter stared at him a long time, her face dry and hot, her fingers trembling.

The morning after that she ran outside without eating. Frightened, Lover of Wheat followed her, but the daughter was swift, and by the time the mother reached the field the daughter had taken the hand of Shadow and walked into a darkness in the rocks.

The girl found herself on a stone stairway that went deep into the Earth. When they reached the bottom, Shadow put his arm around her, and stroked her face with long fingers, and touched her shoulders, and her back, and finally her lips. She trembled, and closed her eyes, and let him hold her, and kiss her, and when he whispered, "Be my bride," she whispered back, "Yes. I am your bride."

While she stood there, and gave herself, soft voices gathered all around them. When she opened her eyes she discovered she was in the Land of the Dead. Great crowds of shadow-people surrounded her. "Shining in Darkness!" they shouted, and when she looked at her arms she discovered it was true, light pulsed from her with every breath. She turned to Death, her dark husband, and turned back to look at the hungry faces who already

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longed for the joy only she could bring them. That was when she knew, she would love her husband deeply, but she would love the dead as well.

In the world above Shining in Darkness, her mother, Lover of Wheat, wailed and waved her hands. At first the Gods tried to soothe her, but then they grew angry. "Why should you complain?" they told her. What better husband could there be than Death, for he was always constant, and his subjects endless?

Lover of Wheat would not be consoled, only cried louder until the King of the Gods, whose name was Voice in the Sky, ordered her to stop that terrible noise. She fell silent then, but only for a while. She found the empty shell of a dead turtle and attached to it the neck of a swan who, like the turtle, had gone down to dwell with her daughter's husband. Next she attached long sinews of the muscles of dead cats. Now she strummed her lyre, an instrument born out of death, and she began to sing.

Down below, Shining in Darkness lay next to her great and terrible lord, when suddenly she felt a shock in her heart. A song was riding over her, verse after verse, a song of her return and the world's joy at greeting her. "All the lions will stand roaring...all the owls will fly in moonlight...all the trees will wave their branches...six black horses will come running...*all the dead will rise up singing*...."

"No!" she cried, and Death woke up to stare at his beloved. "Help me," she begged, for the song was pulling her. Already she could feel herself fading from darkness. Her husband tried to hold her, all the dead crowded round to protect her. They shouted to drown out the song but it was no use, the melody filled her and lifted her, she pulsed between shadow and light. "Six white horses...."

At the last moment, Death reached into his own body and took out his heart. The dead rushed up to it and it opened like a pomegranate of darkness, with a thousand seeds. Just before she vanished, while her fingertips still touched her husband and their endless tribe, Shining took three seeds and swallowed them.

An instant later she stood again in the breezes and smells of life, in a field of flowers, so bright with such an excess of color, she could not bear to look at them. Her mother stood there, tall and strong. Lover of Wheat dropped the lyre and held out her arms, but when she saw her daughter's face filled with grief she whispered, "What have I done?"

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Shining in Darkness said to her mother, "As you are to the Living, so I was to the Dead."

"Oh my blessed child," Lover of Wheat cried. "I have done a terrible thing." They wept together, and at last the Daughter embraced the Mother, for sorrow had overcome her anger. When they stepped back, Lover of Wheat said, "Now tell me. Did you eat anything in the Deep Below?"

Shining nodded. "Yes," she said. "I ate three seeds of my husband's heart."

Her mother smiled, with love and sadness. "Then you are free to return to him for one third of every year. In the season of the lion and the season of the swan you will remain with me, but in the season of the serpent you may join your husband and all your children."

This was the story told by Tribute of Angels on the second night of his service to his master, Immortal Snake. All those who heard it never knew exactly when the story ended, for they floated down strange and glowing rivers until finally the dawn came and they discovered themselves back in the Hall of Precious Happiness. Silently they left the room, careful not to look at each other until only the Snake and his companion remained.

Tribute of Angels sat with his hands in his lap, his eyes cast down. The Snake whispered, "Come again tonight."

"As you wish, Great Lord."

"No. Not my wish. My life. Your voice is my breath. Your stories are my blood. I was dead and you have brought me alive."

Tribute of Angels raised his head now, and for the first time his eyes met the eyes of the Snake. "Yes," he said. "I will come again this evening."

"Thank you," said the ruler.

THAT AFTERNOON, four women dressed as deputy ministers came to the slave room of Tribute of Angels. Their disguises were not very good, really, despite their false beards and mustaches, and hair pinned up under a minister's three-cornered hat. They giggled when Tribute of Angels inclined his head and said, "My lords. How may I serve you?"

In a deep breathy voice the one who wore the highest rank announced, "We have come to take you to your new quarters."

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Tribute of Angels stood up. "As you wish."

They marched from the outer to the inner rings of the Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth until they came to a wide set of rooms with high ceilings. There were subtle tapestries on the walls, and carpets that mimicked a summer lawn. Lacquered chairs and tables were draped with clothes, from shimmery robes with striped collars to shoes with long toes that turned up in spirals. In the inner chamber a large bed was piled high with pillows and blankets of every color.

The minister smirked as she waved a long graceful hand whose fingers were each painted a different color. "Do you like it?" she said.

The storyteller said, "It is all very beautiful."

"Our lord Immortal Snake ordered that we prepare these rooms for you."

"My gratitude is beyond words."

They giggled again, nearly overcome at the idea of anything beyond the words of this blessed being. The minister said, "I chose the clothing myself." She inclined her head sweetly toward the inner chamber. "For you and for the place of rest. And pleasure."

Tribute of Angels bowed his head. "Your taste is exquisite. I hope you will not consider me ungrateful if I ask for a small change."

"Of course. Our lord said to give you whatever you desire." She smiled, and the others stared at the floor.

"I have only one need. A smaller bed." As the women stared he said, "I am a slave. My only joy is the service of my lord. I will live here, and wear the clothes Immortal Snake wishes for me, but I would sleep in a slave's bed, narrow and hard."

She tried another smile. "Ah, but what if you desire company?"

"In that case, my lord, I am sure the proper setting will reveal itself."

The imitation ministers left without further comment. In a short time workers came to remove the bed that would have housed the storyteller and all four of the women. Tribute of Angels was not there, and gone were the bed linens and most of the clothing. He had taken them to the outer rings, to distribute among the slaves and the poor.

That night his story was a sad one, about a woman who gives birth to a phantom. Those who heard it found themselves under a gray sky, with only streaks of rose and violet colored lightning to guide them. Though the

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listeners blinked open their eyes at dawn with the belief that they had wept for a hundred years they still sent rings and paintings and marvelous toys to the storyteller's bare and lavish rooms. He gave away everything but one painting, a miniature of a black and yellow bird perched at the top of a golden tree.

During all this time, the three years that were officially the same moment in the never ending life of Immortal Snake, his sister and companion, Broken by Heaven, remained in the small empty room she had chosen for herself. Her servants lived more lavishly than she, for they were ladies of the court, and she had given them her gray-washed rooms and moved into the servant's room. Despite the pleas of her young ladies, who longed for romance and intrigue, she refused to go anywhere or see anyone. There was no point, for at any moment the trumpets might sound and the white bulls trample the stone streets. And then the Holy Readers would cut her throat, and cook her into their poisonous stew.

So she sat quietly, often just staring at the wall, or occasionally writing poetry, in complicated forms, in a large leather book that had once belonged to her grandmother, using very black ink to write over the supposedly wise and sacred teachings that covered the pages. Should she kill herself? It would end the terrible waiting, and if nothing else it might disrupt the calculations of the Readers. Just for that reason, she knew they would never allow it. Along with the chattering ladies two men stood guard at her doorway. They told her that the Snake had sent them to protect her, but she knew why they were there, and whose orders they followed.

Sometimes the young ladies teased the guards and pretended to seduce them. Oddly, Broken by Heaven never seemed to mind their silliness. In the days when she was More Clever Than Her Father she detested such women, whose heads contained nothing but powder and kohl. Now, however, she enjoyed their laughter and their whispers, their heartbreaks that never seemed to last more than a few days, even their occasional pouting. They were alive, and eager, and no one was waiting for the right moment to murder them. They were all she had, and she loved them.

So it was that one day, after noticing them even more breathless and

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twittery than usual, she asked what had so excited their interest. One of them, a bright young lady named Flower of Her Brothers, clapped her hands and said, "Oh mistress, last night we went to hear Tribute of Angels. It was so marvelous. You must go." The others joined in, "Yes, please please go."

Broken by Heaven smiled at her. "And what exactly does this Tribute of Angels do? Is he a singer? A love poet?"

"Oh no," Flower said, and all the ladies laughed at the thought that there was anyone, anywhere, who did not know of this wonderful man who was a very gift of God. She said, with a certain pride, "Tribute of Angels is a storyteller."

Broken by Heaven closed her eyes. She remembered now. She had heard how after she'd walked out on her wretched brother he had taunted his ministers by choosing a storytelling slave to be his male companion. Soon — at any moment — she and this slave would bubble and cook together in a bowl of death. She said, "I would like to hear this man. Do you think he will perform again tonight?"

The girls jumped up and down with excitement. "Yes, yes," they proclaimed, "he tells his marvels every night. There's a feast beforehand. We can dress you and — "

Broken held up a hand. "I think the storyteller will be enough for me. What time does he begin?"

She entered the Hall of Precious Happiness just as the guests finished the final glass of wine, the last dates coated in exotic jellies. She wore a white dress, cut too large and made of thick cloth so that it appeared she had no body, only a head riding on clouds. She might as well have worn burlap from head to toe with only an eyehole for all the difference it made. Or, for that matter, a dress of light spun from the mouths of stars. Tribute of Angels's head rose up as if pulled by wires the moment she entered the room. She saw him and staggered backward. After that neither moved, but only stared with frozen faces, as if they would hold that moment forever.

Immortal Snake took no notice, only said, "Well? We're done eating. We're ready. Blessed God, you haven't run out of stories, have you?"

Tribute of Angels lowered his eyes. "No, Great Lord. The well of stories is inexhaustible, for every moment more stories are born than anyone can tell."

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"Well, then you better begin."

"The fulfillment comes before the wish."

That night Tribute of Angels told of a king, an alchemist, who had discovered that he could live forever by drinking the blood of young women. He had no shortage of sacrifices; he was rich, and powerful, and the poor offered their daughters to him. But he was also alone, and he longed for a queen who could rule alongside him. One day he heard of a woman more beautiful than the birds, more perfect than the morning star. He sent his nephew to bring her back for him. "Tell her," he said, "that she will never die, for I will not take her, but instead we will share our blood, and together we will drink the milk of paradise."

The king lived on an island, and so the nephew sailed away in a marvelous round boat guided by songs; he would sing to the sea, and the currents would carry him. When the woman heard the king's message she agreed to go with the nephew, for all her life she had never allowed herself any pleasure or desire, fearful that a fever or a random arrow or a hungry beast would take her away from whatever happiness she might possibly find. She traveled with him, and they were in sight of land, when a whale breached against the side of the boat, pitching them against each other. The nephew had his mouth open and it happened that his teeth fell against her neck, so that he, and not his uncle, was the first to taste her blood.

Nothing sweeter had ever flowed down the throat of any creature, human, or angel. And for her, the puncture of his teeth was like the burst of a bubble that had hid from her all the glory and wonder of the world. He told her that if she joined with him she would give up immortality, for only his uncle knew the secret of turning blood into life. It made no difference, she said. Quickly he bared his neck, and she bit him, and they were bound together.

The tale went on to tell of the king's rage, the lovers' flight, how they found themselves, after years of hiding in caves, in a lost sanctuary known as the Garden of the Two Trees. Once, in the early days of the world, this garden had been a sheltered place, but now the roots of the Trees had withered, and all the leaves had turned to stone. Here they would die, they said, for above them they could see the king's ravens and knew he would be upon them in days. They had reached the end, and no longer wanted to run.

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Long ago, the Living World had sent an angel with a flaming sword to guard the entrance to the Garden. As the Trees withered, however, the angel had fallen asleep, and now when the king arrived, he found the sword lying on the ground. He picked it up and raised it over his head, eager to destroy his traitorous nephew and the woman who had turned down immortality for the life of a fugitive. The two made no attempt to hide, but only sat in peace, ready for the blow.

As the king lifted the sword, however, it struck a stone wall, and sparks of fire scattered on the ground. The sparks burned a hole into the earth and out of it came the ghosts of all the women whom the king had killed. In moments the ghosts surrounded him and pulled him down into the Land of the Dead, where he still remains, the only living being among the shadows of Death.

The nephew and the lover were free. When he kissed her, then bit her neck, two drops of blood fell onto the roots of the great Trees. They heard a sigh, and then, slowly, the roots filled out, fresh leaves grew on the branches, and light and fragrance filled the air.

When the story ended everyone had fallen asleep but the Snake's two companions. Broken by Heaven walked through the scattered bodies, never looking down, never missing a step, drawn to Tribute of Angels like a shooting star pulled down to Earth. The storyteller stood with his body tilted toward her, then stepped toward her so that they were both moving at the moment they met, like butterflies mating in the air.

They kissed until the end of the world, until the Readers all died out and their observatory crumbled, until her brother and all the Immortal Snakes had wandered off into caves to meditate and dream, until the Moon and Sun merged together. So it seemed, but when she finally let go and opened her eyes she saw it was still night, and her brother and all his guests and servants and slaves still sat in their chairs, or lay on the carpets, or stood propped against pillars of marble and onyx — and every one of them asleep.

Tribute of Angels said, "I have no place."

"I know of one," she told him, and took his hand. She led him through rooms and corridors until they came to a mahogany door that opened into the bed chamber of Immortal Snake. They spent the night there, deep in each other's bodies, until just before dawn when they returned to their

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places in the Hall of Precious Happiness. Soon everyone awoke and left the room.

THAT DAY, Broken by Heaven surprised her ladies by asking for color in her clothes. After several consultations and dashes to seamstresses they presented to her a violet dress shot through with swirls of yellow and green. Their suggestion of a special haircut was met with a single upraised hand, so they settled for taking turns brushing her hair, ten strokes each, with a silent prayer for their mistress's happiness at the start of every stroke.

The dress fit so well, and her hair shone so brightly, that Immortal Snake did not even recognize her until his eyes had followed her halfway into the Hall of Precious Happiness. When he realized this was his sister he blushed, then made a face, thinking she had come to lecture him for wasting his time with stories. He braced himself for a fight, lining up in his mind all his recent efforts to persuade his ministers to help the poor. When she said nothing, only smiled (he could hardly remember the last time that had happened), and took a seat at his right, not far from the storyteller, he was surprised to discover he was disappointed. He almost wanted her to scold him so he could show her how wrong she was.

The tale that night was like a drug, a smoke or an oil that first delights the senses, and then carries one away down a river of color and sound, and wave after wave of pleasure. It was not really sleep it brought, and not really a dream, but in a short time they were all gone. All but the storyteller himself, and one of his listeners. Broken by Heaven stood up, and Tribute of Angels rose beside her. They kissed a long sweet time, certain that no one would disturb them. Then once again she took his hand and led him to the wide bed of the ruler of the world.

They continued this way for a week until one night, as the dawn approached, and Tribute of Angels began to gather his clothes to return to the Hall, his love began to cry. He said nothing, only kissed the flow of tears on her face. Finally she looked at him and she said, "I don't want to die."

"No," he said.

"They will come today, or tomorrow, or next week — Do you know what they will do to us?"

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"Yes."

"*I don't want to die.*" He held her now, his arms and legs around her, his head on hers, as if the force of his love could shield her from heaven and earth. Then, to his astonishment, she laughed. When he unwound from her it was like unwrapping a present. "I have an idea," she said.

That afternoon the female companion to Immortal Snake, dressed in the simple clothes of a minor lady of the court, made her way through the intricate streets of the Nine Rings to a hill beyond the edge of the city. There were no trees on this path, only the single fig tree at the top of the hill, that her brother had planted when he became Immortal Snake. Here and there crosses stood alongside the road, hung with tattered clothes like pieces of skin. Broken by Heaven knew what they were, of course, the symbols of the dried out skins of all the Immortal Snakes who had gone before her brother, and whose actual skins remained in the vaults underneath the observatory. Beyond the road, in large black pens, the white bulls snorted and scratched at the ground, as if they themselves were only waiting for the moment when they could tear her to pieces. She stopped a moment and stared at one of them, his shoulders like earthquakes, his eyes like tornadoes. He stamped the earth and she almost lost her balance but she held fast, and when the bull looked away, the female companion of Immortal Snake laughed and continued up the path.

The Kingdom of God was a large square building with a glass roof. There were four doors, one for each season. At dawn on the equinoxes and solstices the Readers of God would step out the door of that time of year and sound the trumpets, as if they themselves commanded the sun to show itself. Broken By Heaven took a breath and entered the gray door of winter.

A consultation was taking place, and Broken by Heaven stayed back while the Reader told a jewelry maker the best day to open a new shop in a colony city. When the jeweler had placed the proper fee in a toad-shaped box made of gold and jade, and then hurried out (for no one stayed longer than necessary in the Kingdom of God) Broken by Heaven stepped into the light of the wide room.

At first the Reader allowed shock to open his face, for it was no secret what the Snake's companion thought of the Readers and their sacred duty. Quickly he recovered and crossed his arms over his chest as he inclined

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his head. "Mistress," he said, "how may this servant of God help you?"

She looked around. The ceiling was high, and painted with stars, and animals running through the sky. Along the walls stood more of the tattered effigies on crosses but now the rags were made of gold leaf. Broken by Heaven said, "I've never been here before."

"No, Mistress."

She smiled to see his nervousness. Though he wore the yellow and purple robe of his office, the fabric looked a little thin, the snake amulet around his neck made of bronze instead of gold. She said, "I wonder if you might ask the head of your order if he wouldn't mind talking with me a moment. I have a question I would like to ask him."

"Of course," the man said, and hurried away, eager to let someone else answer her questions. They could not deny her. The Snake's companions into death were due every honor, every request granted but one.

The master was a larger version of the underling, broader, thicker, with gray hair grandly swept back, a bushy beard with eyebrows to match, a thick nose and scarred hands. Broken by Heaven had heard he was once a wrestler. His robe was thick and luxurious, his talisman almost large enough to be a breastplate. Gold, it depicted a snake wound around a tree whose fruit was stars. "Great light of our heart," he said. "You fill this hardworking temple with joy."

"Thank you," Broken by Heaven said, and nodded. Then, "Lately I find myself awake at night, curious beyond curious with a single question."

She could see his shoulders tense, the head tilt down slightly. Carefully he said, "My lady, some things we cannot know in advance. All we can do is give ourselves to the sacrifice when God reveals the moment."

Broken pretended to be startled, amused. "Oh no," she said. "I would never — that would be like cheating, wouldn't it?" She smiled sweetly at him.

"Please forgive me, mistress, I wasn't saying — "

"To be honest, my question is not practical but philosophical." He said nothing. "Tell me. What is God's greatest gift to the world?"

He laughed. "What you ask is too easy. Certainly God's greatest gift is the writing in the sky. Through this one benevolence we know

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everything — when to plant, when to harvest, when to attack or defend, when to build homes or compose songs, when to dig a well or begin a marriage — everything."

She nodded. "What you say is of course true. But God has given Tribute of Angels the power to tell stories in a way that has never been equaled."

For a moment he stared at her, outraged. Then his breathing calmed and he said, "You are not suggesting that a storyteller can surpass God's writing in the sky?"

"No. I am saying that this life on Earth is a greater wonder than all the calendars of heaven. And the voice and stories of Tribute of Angels are the doors to understand this."

"Forgive me, Lady, but what you say is nonsense. God's writing lasts forever." He did not add, "And the voice of the storyteller ends the moment we kill him."

She said, "The writing in the sky, the moon and the stars, you know these things. Have you listened to Tribute of Angels?"

"Of course not."

"Then how can you judge? Only come tonight, you and all your brothers. Come this one time, and then you may decide."

The old battler crossed his arms. "We will be there, but I warn you, we will not stay. God's writing is a gift that renews itself every evening."

"Thank you," she said. "I look forward to your presence in our company."

When Broken by Heaven returned to her room she wrote a short note on a piece of blue parchment, sealed it with a stamp of a boy and girl holding hands in a garden, then gave it to Flower of Her Brothers, the least frivolous of her servants. She said, "Take this to Tribute of Angels."

The storyteller bowed his gratitude to the breathless young woman, then waited till she left before breaking the seal. "They come tonight," the note said. "Be ready."

When he first saw the Readers enter his Hall of Precious Happiness, Immortal Snake jumped from his chair as if he would outrun them. The guests too rushed to the side of the room, expecting bulls to charge in and trample the ruler. They soon realized that no trumpets had sounded, no orders had come for the people to hide themselves in their houses. And

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look, there were the Snake's companions, and neither of them had panicked. Carefully the guests returned to their seats.

"Great lord," the Master said, with all his crew, some twelve of them, from boys to old men, clustered behind him. "Your sister, who is beloved of heaven, took pity on our loneliness and came to speak with us." Immortal Snake stared at his sister, who looked down at her hands in her lap. He glanced back at the Reader, who did not seem to find such modesty unusual. The Readers, however, had not known her all their lives. Suddenly interested, Immortal Snake leaned back in his chair and said, "My sister is a kind and generous woman."

"She told us," the Reader said, "of the wondrous stories told every night by your blessed companion, Tribute of Angels."

Now the Snake looked to his other side, where the slave too sat modestly. The remains of his panic flowed out of him now, and he raised a palm, as if in gratitude to God. He said to this man, who some day would feed him poison and mount his skin upon a stick, "The Living World honors us to have given us such blessings as Tribute of Angels. And of course my sister." He waved a hand to the slaves, who rushed forward with chairs and cushions. "Please," the Snake said. "Come sit with us. Would you like some roast pork? My cooks have stuffed it with dates and fennel."

"Forgive us, Lord," the head Reader said. "Our time is limited. The stars have already begun to show themselves, and the planets to move among them. When the moon rises we must go with it."

"Of course," Immortal Snake said.

"So if we leave before the end of the story, you will understand that we are only following our duty."

Immortal Snake noticed that his sister had abandoned demureness and was now smiling warmly at their guests. A strange excitement stirred his spine. He said, "We understand." He turned to his slave companion. "You had better begin if our guests will have to leave early."

Tribute of Angels said, "Your wish creates my voice."

That night Tribute of Angels told a story of the first people. In the beginning there was only mud and stones, and the bright sky, and trees as thick as houses, and flowers in colors no one remembers. Then there were lions, and spiders, and squirrels, and nightingales, but no people. One morning a leopard came home from hunting all night to discover that an

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eagle had killed his wife. The leopard had no idea why the eagle would do this, only that his wife's body lay in pieces on the dirt. He roared and wept and begged her to come back to him but it was no use. After a day of sorrow he flung his wife's remains on his back and left the open fields and woods that had been their home.

The leopard walked for nine days and nights, frightened to sleep lest crows and jackals and ants take away more pieces of his wife. Finally he came to a desert, and a dream of an oasis. There was nothing there, really, but if the leopard closed his eyes he saw bright trees, and a waterfall, and herds of antelope who had never heard of leopards. He set down his wife's body alongside what he imagined was a pool and lay down next to her. Then he wept and wept until there was nothing left of him but spotted skin over a pool of tears. The tears changed the dirt to salty mud, and out of this mud the first people stood up, naked and frightened, with no idea of how they would live.

For generations people traveled from desert to forest, from islands to mountains, frightened, stealing whatever food they could from the animals, hiding in caves or the tops of trees. They traveled from the north to the south; from the east to the west, and everywhere they were hungry and helpless and hunted.

One night a woman with three sons hid in a muddy hole in the Earth, a place not much different from any other except that the walls flickered with black and yellow light. Though she did not know it, she had found her way back to the cave of the dead leopards. That night she dreamed of the sky.

Usually her dreams were of running, and the teeth of wild beasts, but now she dreamed that she sat upon a rock high on a mountain and looked up at a sky that flowed like blue water over the peaks of the world. In all her life she had never dared to stare up like that — what if a pack of dogs attacked her children, what if the other women picked all the roots before she got to them? But here, in her dream, she stared and stared, and the more she looked the more she could glimpse a different world on the other side.

She woke up with sorrow in her throat. All day she thought of the dream, while she dug in the dirt for worms, while she searched for bubbles of rainwater that would not make her too sick. That night she rushed to

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feed her sons so she could return to sleep. Lying there on the mud floor, her body sighed with pleasure as she found herself safely back in the dream.

This time she saw creatures in the world beyond the sky. Some were two-legged like people, except that they had beaks like birds, and sometimes wings that flashed out from their shoulder blades. And they stood upright, their backs straight, unafraid. There were other creatures, brightly colored bulls and horses. They looked solid yet they also seemed made of music and light.

That morning she woke up in tears and wept all day long. As evening approached she did everything possible to avoid falling asleep, for she could not bear to visit that world and wake up in this one. She could not help herself, she fell asleep before the moon rose.

Instead of sorrow, however, she found hope, for this time the dream was different. She was not alone but stood in the center of a crowd of people. Under her command the people constructed a stone pyramid that allowed them to climb close to the sky world. With stone knives painted with pictures of the sky creatures they slashed their arms and flung the blood above their heads. Hawks and eagles raced for the blood, and as they fought for it their beaks and wings slashed open the sky.

The creatures of light and music poured down into the world. They raised up the people and fed them sky food so that the people would live forever and never be hungry. They showed the people how to make buildings out of songs, graceful houses where everyone could rest comfortably, temples that spiraled up into the sky so the people could meet with the sky creatures and praise them and receive their blessings.

When the woman woke up she jumped to her feet, summoned her boys, and began a journey to tell everyone her dreams, and what they all should do to open a door for the sky people to enter their world. At first no one believed her. They chased her with rocks or tried to take her sons away to make them dig for food. Slowly, the woman's insistence began to convince people, first one or two, then larger groups. Soon she had several hundred people, enough to build a pyramid to open the sky.

Everything happened just as in her dream. When they climbed the pyramid they could see the thinness of the sky, see and hear and even smell the world beyond. They cut their arms and flung their blood upward

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with great drama and energy. Sure enough, there came the birds, and they fought each other in their hunger, and the claws and beaks tore open the sky, and the creatures of light and music entered through the gash. Soon the Bright Beings stood on the pyramid, towering over the people.

And then it changed. Instead of giving instruction and blessing, the creatures of light and music began to snatch up the people and lift them to their mouths, where teeth like icicles broke them in pieces.

The people screamed and knocked each other down as they tried to run or just tumble down the pyramid. Some jumped off, for they'd rather crush themselves on the rocks, a death they understood, than be swallowed in dark ice.

The woman who had brought this disaster was in fact one of the few who escaped. She reached the ground and ran as hard as she could, slipping on blood, weaving between pieces of bodies. She kept running until she came to the shelter where she'd hidden her three sons.

If life was hard before, now it was much worse, for as well as animals and cold and sickness and hunger the people had to hide from the Bright Ones.

Time passed, and the woman did little but wail and wave her hands, so that her sons had to carry her on their backs as they moved from one hiding place to another. Finally the oldest son said, "Enough! We need to fight back." On their travels he'd seen how a certain kind of rock was changed with fire to become hard and shiny, with sharp edges. Now he found some and took it to a bubbling volcano where he could heat it and then work it with other stones. Then he cooled it in the evening rain. He did this during the new moon, when power becomes strong. When the weapon was ready he stood up in an open field and challenged the Bright Beings, thinking if he could cut open just one or two they might respect the people and keep away.

It was hopeless. They broke his shiny weapon like a toy, then tore him apart, sounding laughter through the hills.

The second brother decided that the first had been a fool to challenge the Powers. He climbed a hill with his head down like a submissive dog, making sweeping gestures with his arms as if to clear away his unworthiness before he even took a step. When he reached the top he threw himself face down on the ground and called out, "Great Ones! Creatures of music

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and light. Spare me and my family and I will show you where the people are hiding."

The red and black horses shook their manes. The golden bulls stamped their feet. The one with the head of a hawk said, "Why do we need you? We can smell humans whenever we want them." And then the second brother too was torn apart.

The youngest one had heard and seen what happened to his brothers. Now he slipped quietly down to where his mother was hiding. The mother shrieked and hit the flats of her hands against the sides of her head when she realized two of her sons were gone. The youngest grabbed her wrists and leaned forward until he could feel her breath. "Be quiet," he said, "or I will cut your throat." She stared at him, then cowered silently against the wall. When he told her to give him her clothes she immediately obeyed.

With his mother's clothes under his arm the boy went to a deep cave he had discovered at the foot of the pyramid where the people had opened the sky. Using mud and ochre he painted great pictures of the bulls and horses and the bird-headed creatures. Next he found a tree that had fallen and been hollowed out by termites. He carried this with him to the cave, where he took the skins of people who'd thrown themselves from the heights and sewed them together, then stretched them over the ends of the hollow tree to make a drum. Finally he took a leg bone, cleaned it and polished it, and set it aside as a striker.

Now he put on his mother's rags and rubbed mud on his face, and went outside the cave where he hit his hands against his face and cried out, "Oh! Oh! Oh! I am the most wretched woman who has ever lived. My babies are eaten, no one will help me, everyone hates me. Oh! Oh! Oh!"

The Great Ones laughed and came charging at him as he ran into the cave. When they got inside, however, they forgot all about him, for they saw the pictures and became entranced. Excited, they rushed into the scenes on the walls.

Immediately, the boy jumped up and pounded the drum. "Brightness of sky," he chanted. Bam! "Hardness of earth," Bam! "Don't leave these walls." Bam! "Through death and through birth." Bam!

The Great Ones struggled and twisted but it was no use. They were trapped in the paintings and would never get out. Once more the boy

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chanted and hit the drum. "Trapped in stone." Bam! "Trapped in dirt." Bam! "Feed our hunger." Bam! "Heal our hurt." Bam!

Ever since that day the people could compel the Creatures of Music and Light to help and teach them, but the Bright Ones could never escape to enslave or eat the people ever again.

THIS WAS THE STORY told by Tribute of Angels on the night the Readers of the Sky traveled down from their observatory in the Kingdom of God to Immortal Snake's Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth. The story began at evening but no one knew when it ended. Around the time of the moonrise a few of the Readers shuddered, and pain flickered through their faces, but they did not leave their places. When morning came, and the guests and servants and slaves shook themselves awake, the Readers hurried from the hall.

That afternoon Broken by Heaven once again climbed the hill to the Kingdom of God. The chief of the Readers met her at the door, his arms folded, his feet firm on the ground. They stared at each other a moment, then Broken by Heaven said, "Which is greater? God's writing in the sky, or the stories of Tribute of Angels?"

"We were not ready," the Reader said. "You did not tell us." The sister of the Snake said nothing. "We will come again tonight."

Broken by Heaven bowed her head. "Your wisdom is great," she said.

All that day the Readers chanted and burned pieces of paper with prayers for strength. They tethered a young bull in their courtyard, walked around it seven times, one for each of the planetary spheres, and then slaughtered it, first cutting its fetlocks so it would topple forward, then the throat. They let the blood drain into the earth, then cut out the heart, which they burned so that the fire might carry the dead bull to the Living World. There, they hoped, the bull would tell of their devotion, and the angels would buoy them up to resist this man who claimed to be the angels' tribute.

The Readers came to the Hall of Precious Happiness that evening wearing their formal robes, with black vertical stripes cutting through the purple and yellow. They wore their bull masks, and each carried one of the crosses with tattered rags. When those symbolic skins entered the room,

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Broken by Heaven looked at her brother. She was pleased to see that he only cringed, and just for a moment. The Readers set their burdens against the walls and sat down with folded arms. None of them spoke. After a few silent breaths Immortal Snake turned to his left, where Tribute of Angels sat on a cushion. "We seem to be all here," the ruler said. "Why don't you begin?"

The story that night was a simple one, about a boy who falls in love with the moon. Every month, as the moon wanes, he offers parts of his body to the wolves so that he might dwindle with his love until, at the dark of the moon, he lets them tear out his heart. But the moon has changed his heart to white quartz, so that the wolves cannot swallow it, and every month squirrels find it and place it in a dirt mound, and add twigs and nuts and dung to it, so that slowly it takes the shape of a boy. Finally, the light of the full moon brings him alive for he and his lover to be united for three precious nights.

The story was short, but all who heard it drifted away from the Earth, carried beyond the houses and treetops, beyond the mountains, far into the region of the evening stars. Soon they were cast into a deep sleep from which not even a storm could have stirred them. All but Broken by Heaven and Tribute of Angels, for they were in the trance of love, and that is deeper even than stories.

They spent the night wrapt together in the bed of Immortal Snake. When they returned to the hall the guests were just starting to awake. Once again the Readers hurried from the room, not looking at each other, even leaving behind their effigies of cast-off skins. Immortal Snake pointed to the tattered crosses and said to a pair of slaves, "Take those things away and burn them." Broken by Heaven stared at her brother.

She did not visit the Readers that day. Instead she lay on her bed while her young women darted all around her, and she thought about Immortal Snake. He was the weakest part, and therefore the most dangerous, of all her plans. Would he be ready when the time came? She had learned to expect so little from him, but he seemed different, stronger. Had the stories of her beloved Tribute changed him? Could they have rearranged his brain and heart? She smiled at the thought. A month ago she might have said it would take a miracle to change her brother. But wasn't Tribute of Angels exactly that? She closed her eyes so that her body might

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remember his voice, his lips, his hands, his body pressed against her, inside her. He was, she thought, the breath of God speaking through the harsh words of humans.

The next night the Readers came without announcement or ceremony. They sat in places already reserved for them, they listened and slept, and when morning came they hurried away.

So it continued. Every evening the Readers slipped into the hall, their eyes down as if they did not want to see each other, or pretend that if they did not look no one could see them. Every morning they hurried away, like a man who has a vision of God in some unlikely place and is embarrassed to let anyone know but he will make sure to come back.

A surprise came to Broken by Heaven on the day she went to her brother to suggest he think about his responsibilities to his people. She expected ridicule, or just petulance. Instead he asked her to help him, to tell him what to do. They began to work together, for the poor, the merchants, the fishermen and farmers. They even punished those who took bribes and cheated the people. They talked together sometimes for hours, and made plans to use the Army of Heaven to help people in faraway lands. What Broken by Heaven did not tell her brother was that all this work, all this change, was in fact preparation. For she was waiting for a certain event, or rather a moment, and there was no way to know exactly when that might happen.

The moment came at the beginning of Spring, when the first flowers broke through their buds to offer color to the sky and to the eternal glory of Immortal Snake. Broken by Heaven was surprised it did not happen sooner, and while she was grateful for the time to prepare her brother, she had become anxious, and had taken to staring at those early buds, or the birds annoying the sellers in the market, thinking "Too much time has passed. It should have happened by now."

Then, on a cool morning with clusters of clouds low in the sky, a man walked the path up to the Kingdom of God. He was ordinary, this man, short, fleshy, a spice dealer. It could have been anybody. He entered the temple, glanced around nervously, then placed his hands together and inclined his scraggly beard toward the lower level Reader who had come to greet him and take his money in exchange for the usual blessing or amulet.

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The request, however, was more substantial. "Wise one," the man said, "my daughter is getting married and of course she cannot do so until after the middle day of the Spring Festival." The reader nodded; any marriage begun in the weeks prior to the Day of Cuts would never see a single child. He nodded, but his face was strangely pale. The spice dealer continued, "I have not heard any announcements of the Festival. Can you tell me, please, when it will happen so we may plan the wedding?"

The Reader stood silent a moment, then said, "Please wait."

Inside, in the meeting room, he found the majority of his friends and superiors, some playing the game of Chase on a board of red and blue triangles, others sipping tea, or reading. He thought, *they're waiting for evening*. "A man asks the time of the Spring Festival," he said. "What should I tell him?" Everyone looked around the room. "Who has been studying the night sky?" Now they all looked down. "Has anyone written down the progress of the moon and planets?"

One of the Readers jumped up. "Follow me," he announced. They did so eagerly, grouped behind him as he marched past the statues and wall carpets to the private chamber of their leader. Through a half-open door they could see him standing by the window, like a man caught in a memory of a dream. He was turned in the direction of the Hall of Precious Happiness.

Fury rose in him when they told him their dilemma. "This is absurd," he said. "All we need to do is consult the book and give the man his answer." No one answered him, and when they had all climbed up the tower to the records room just outside the glass-roofed observatory, and the Master slammed open the giant gold-bound book, he too fell silent. No one came close enough to look; they all knew what they would find, blank pages since that first evening they had gone to hear Tribute of Angels. For weeks they had been using old calculations for the minor questions presented to them, but the Spring enactment was of a different order.

Finally the oldest among them, whose robe was so worn the colors had run together, spoke softly. "We were enchanted. A spell has taken us away from God's writing in the sky. Now we cannot say when the seasons call their festivals. We no longer know when to shed the skin of the Snake."

The High Reader clenched his fists. "Tribute of Angels must die."

The old man said, "If the Living World has sent him it is the will of

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God. But if he does not come from God he must surely die, for no creature can resist him. I have looked, and even the insects cease their flight to listen to him."

The master answered, "God taught us that the sky is a living book, with words written every night. Tribute of Angels has taken us away from that wonder of wonders. How could he have come from God?"

"Then he must die," the old man said.

They turned back to the stairs. Softly, the young Reader who had begun it all asked, "What should I tell him? The man who asked about the Festival?"

When the master didn't answer, the old man said, "Tell him to be patient a short time longer, until the will of God shall reveal itself."

All that day and night the Readers built up their power. They cut the throats of three bulls, they cut their own arms and legs, they burned parchments with prayers, they burned the clothes they'd worn when they went to hear Tribute of Angels. In the morning they marched down the hill to the great city and palace of Immortal Snake.

A single figure stood at the gate. Broken by Heaven stood motionless in a long white dress, with a white jewel set upon her forehead.

The Master Reader crossed his thick arms on his chest. "Mistress," he said, "please step aside. We come as messengers from the Living World."

Broken by Heaven said, "When we spoke weeks ago I told you that God's greatest gift was not the writing in the sky but life on Earth, revealed in the stories of Tribute of Angels. Now, today, tell me if I lied or spoke the truth."

The Reader answered, "Tribute of Angels desecrates the will of Heaven. Now he must die."

"And who will kill him?"

"That is the province of Immortal Snake, beloved of God."

"Tribute of Angels is the companion of Immortal Snake. Is it time, then, for the Snake to shed his skin?"

"We will speak with Immortal Snake directly."

"Of course. God dwells in my brother. Come with me." She turned and opened the door that led to the royal pathway of the Nine Rings. Though her skin and all organs trembled, she walked with a firm step, never looking back.

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They found the ruler sitting alone in his petition room, on a chair carved with lions and swans. Broken by Heaven had told him to wait there; now she was pleased to see the formal air he struck, as if indeed the Living World would speak through his mouth.

The High Master of the Readers spread himself face down on a carpet depicting Immortal Snake raising the dead. "Great lord," he said as he rose to his feet. "Speak to us of the slave, Tribute of Angels."

"My companion in death."

"Yes, lord."

"Then I shall speak. God sent me first the terror of my dying and I was frightened as a naked child. God then sent me the memory of the slave who had come to me as a gift, by record from the Emperor of Mud and Glory, but in truth from the Living World. His voice and his spirit made me happy, and so I gave him gifts, beautiful clothes, statues, gold. He gave it all to the poor, and the people love him. He has given me something almost as precious as his tales. He has taught me to serve my people, and for this I would kiss the tips of his fingers."

The Reader said, "He will destroy everything. His stories cover God's writing in the sky. Without that we cannot know when to hold the festivals, we lose the length of days and the order of the nights. We will not know when Immortal Snake must shed his skin. Yes, I speak of that too, for without the sacrifice the Living World will take back its blessing, and nothing will remain but death."

"I once cared for my life," the ruler answered, "but now I care only about my people."

"Good. Then for the sake of the people destroy Tribute of Angels."

Immortal Snake closed his eyes, and his sister held her breath. He looked again and said quietly, "Since we agree that all we do is for the life of the people, the people will decide." The Readers stared at him. "Come tonight to the Plaza of Celestial Glory. Then you will tell your fears to all who wish to hear them." And with that he stood up from his chair of lions and swans and left the room.

The Plaza of Celestial Glory celebrated Written in the Sky's triumph in one of its many battles with the Empire of Mud and Glory. Formed by the facades of the palace and various ministries, its huge open square flashed with gold, rubies, sapphires, and emeralds, the colors of the sun,

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blood, the sea, and the plants, so that all of heaven and earth would honor Immortal Snake.

Soldiers cleared away the beggars and street merchants who usually clogged the sides of the plaza, then workers built platforms for the Readers to address the crowd, and booths for honored guests. Meanwhile, heralds traveled all up and down the Nine Rings, and beyond to the villages and farms, calling out the message that that evening Tribute of Angels would tell his stories to the people.

That afternoon, Broken by Heaven once more traveled to the Temple of Names. At sight of her the priests cringed inside their stone masks of forgotten alphabets. They still remembered the day she demanded they take back her childhood name, and they recognized the basket she carried. She'd already used it to discard her original name relics, the strands of hair, the black doll. When she turned it over this time it held only an oversize white dress of coarse cloth. "My name no longer belongs to me," said Broken by Heaven, who once was More Clever Than Her Father and Everyone Else.

The priest said, "Mistress, the Living World does not like it when a woman — "

"My new name," she said, "is Wiser Than Heaven."

They did the ceremony as quickly as possible and purified themselves as soon as she left.

Thousands gathered, from farmers to ministers, beggars to generals. Even the deaf were there, for word had spread that the stories of Tribute of Angels could heal the sick, including those beyond hearing. At first no one was sure which way to look but then a great snake banner unfurled from a low palace balcony and everyone knew that that would be the source of "the Voice of God," as some were calling the Snake's companion.

Before that voice, however, there came another sound, and if the crowd had been capable of movement they might all have panicked and tried to run inside the buildings. Trumpets. The great copper horns of the Readers sounded in the evening air, and people covered their eyes, for the sound was the signal for Immortal Snake to shed his skin, a ritual no one must witness. They cowered down as best as they could, trying to hide among their neighbors, wondering when the white bulls would trample them.

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Instead, they heard voices, amplified through speaking tubes. "Arise, blessed ones. The champion of heaven and earth calls upon you to watch, and to listen." Still frightened, they nevertheless dared to look up. And then a great cheer surged up from the plaza, for yes, there were the Readers, terrifying in their masks and robes, and look, they carried no effigies this time, but the very remains of previous rulers — but above them, on the royal balcony, Immortal Snake opened his arms to his people. He wore a robe of blue silk streaked with red, the colors of sunrise, and his face was painted golden, and on his head he wore a golden crown in the shape of a coiled serpent with eyes like the night sky flashing with stars.

"Beloved," Immortal Snake called out, and his voice carried across the square to bounce off the sides of the ministries. "Tonight you will give your judgment of what is true and what is false, what is above and what is below. Listen now to those who have served us through all our past glories, the Readers of God's Writing in the Sky."

The Master Reader stood at the front of the platform, with the skins of the past rulers lined up behind him. "You believe," he said, "that Tribute of Angels has come to you from the Living World. This is a lie. He and his stories have risen up from the Abyss. If this man lives, God will abandon us and all our joy and glory will fall to dust."

As soon as the Reader finished, Immortal Snake spoke again. "Now hear the voice of Tribute of Angels. And then decide if he shall live or he shall die."

From inside the palace the storyteller stepped onto the balcony, wearing only his slave cloth. "I am a servant of God," he said. "All hatred in the human heart is a violent strike against the Living World. Therefore, I ask only that no one seek violence. I call for no man's death, but offer only a story. For Immortal Snake has asked that I tell a simple tale, and there is no greater joy than service to Immortal Snake."

In later years scholars would ponder and explore the stories of Tribute of Angels. They would write them all down, both forward and backward, and then add up the number values of all the words, and chart the shape of the letters, and search for phrases that appeared first in one tale and then another. But no one ever talked about the story told on the night the Readers called for the death of the teller. No one wrote it down, and everyone who was there would claim they had no memory of what he said.

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He spoke softly, without the speaking tube, yet each one heard him like a whisper alongside the face. It seemed to each that he or she stood alone in a dark world, and the only light was the glow that flowed from the lips of the storyteller. In the beginning the tale was a sweet dream, soft and quiet. Then a wind came, and swept them into a storm of fire.

He talked through the night, and as the world edged toward morning his voice rose, and the story shifted wildly, one moment as joyous as the hidden doorway to Paradise, the next a lightning bolt of terror. As the first edge of dawn approached, his voice cracked open their bodies and shattered their bones.

At last it was over. The sun had not yet risen but the people discovered they could open their eyes, look around them for the first time in many hours. There, at the feet of the platform, on the mosaic tiles depicting the glory of victory, the Readers lay, every one of them face down in a great wash of blood.

In the plaza the people stared in confusion and horror. Many looked up at the sky, frightened the stars would fall to earth and crush them. On the balcony Immortal Snake had to steady himself as he looked down at the blood, so much of it, he thought he would drown in it. Alongside him, Tribute of Angels stood motionless, his head down, his arms held low, the hands clasped together.

Only his lover was able to speak. Wiser Than Heaven took the arm of her brother. "Now," she whispered, "before they can run away. Look for the white horse tethered just inside the gate. Go!" Immortal Snake stared at her a moment then he seemed to come awake and hurried inside to the stairs. Wiser Than Heaven turned to her beloved. "Walk alongside him," she said. "I will follow."

She watched him as he glided down the stairs, then she stepped onto the balcony. "Children of Immortal Snake," she cried. "Beloved of the Living World. The Angel of Death has stepped among us tonight. God's will has revealed itself. Look up, look up! Do you see? The stars have not vanished, they shine so brightly you can see their faces. The stars cry out with joy. They shine for you, and they shine for Immortal Snake, who has descended from heaven to live on Earth. And now, children of God, behold your ruler. Your servant. Your father. Immortal Snake comes among you!"

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With that the great doors of the palace flung open as if by the hands of angels, and Immortal Snake rode forth on a white horse, its mane braided with diamonds. The people fell back, frightened, but they could not keep away, for he was beautiful, far more than the idealized portraits and statues. It was the beauty of a man who has ridden on the boat of stories, traveling beyond the sky night after night. The storyteller himself stood beside him, and the people bent down to kiss the dirt around his feet. Soon Wiser Than Heaven joined them, and slowly, with the Snake's male companion to his right and his female companion to his left, they moved up the hill to the deserted observatory known as the Kingdom of God.

When they reached it, they saw that the young tree, which the Readers had planted when the new Immortal Snake ascended to the Seat of Heaven's Grace, lay uprooted on the ground, its branches withered and dry, as if it had lain there for years. Wiser Than Heaven took a small gold-handled hoe which she had attached to the saddle and gave it to her brother. "Hoe a small place on either side of the tree," she whispered, and was thankful for the grace and elegance with which he did as she told him. Next, she and Tribute of Angels both took a handful of seeds from a green silk pouch she wore around her neck and dropped them into the hoed dirt.

"Children of the Snake," she called out to the huge crowd. "Now you must close your eyes with holy dread, for no one may witness what is about to happen." All up and down the hill people put their hands over their eyes and crouched down and buried their faces in their arms. A strange faint sound drifted through the air, the softest whisper of a breath, a scratch on the wind. Tribute of Angels was telling a story to the seeds. When at last Wiser Than Heaven called to the people to open their eyes two fully grown fig trees stood at the top of the hill. And behind them vines and flowers covered the walls and doors and windows of the Kingdom of God.

Thus ended the long rule of the Readers, who worshipped the sky and ignored the Earth. No longer would they kill the Snake's companions, no longer would they lure him to shed his skin. From then on, each Immortal Snake would serve his people for the length of his life.

Far to the east, in the Land of Mud and Glory, the man whom his subjects called Emperor of All the World stood in a small dark room with

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the seer of the imperial court. Though the Emperor was a short man and the seer was long and bony, the Emperor rose high above the diviner, for he stood on stilts covered by his long robe painted with the night sky. His face was painted green and his hair was braided and waxed to stand out from his head like the rays of the sun.

Very old and thin, and dressed in a shapeless robe the color of mud, with long white hair, the seer might have been a man and might have been a woman. Not even the Emperor knew, or cared.

The two of them stared into a small three-legged cauldron where the remains of an ancient tortoise bubbled in a dark broth. "Now?" said the Emperor.

"No," the seer said. "Not yet."

The Emperor sighed. ""Then it will not come in my lifetime."

"Perhaps not even in the lifetime of your son. But it will come."

"Then all is good."

IMMORTAL SNAKE ruled seventeen years, dying finally after he went out in a storm to command a tornado not to attack his city. The tornado turned aside, but the ruler became ill and his lungs filled with water and he drowned in his love for his people. During his reign, with his sister and Tribute of Angels beside him, he became the living breath of compassion and wisdom. And power. The Army of Heaven extended its rule over countries and provinces and peoples no one had even known existed. Every year the other Great Powers sent money and treasure to the Nine Rings, while their young men and women imitated the styles and speech and art of the land of Immortal Snake, which was no longer Written in the Sky, but had been renamed, under the direction of the ruler's sister, Mirror of God.

Tribute of Angels no longer spoke every night, but four times a year, at the beginning of the seasons, people gathered at sunset up and down the hills to the south of the Nine Rings. Tribute of Angels would sit cross-legged on top of the hill, wearing the slave clothes in which he'd first come before Immortal Snake. He spoke softly, yet each would hear him as if the Teller sat alongside and whispered in their ears. When morning came, the people would walk away slowly, their faces empty but their eyes lit with

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a secret fire, like someone who dreams that he has passed through the seven spheres and come upon the hidden throne of God.

When Immortal Snake died, panic rose up in the land. People burned their crops at night, for fear the sun had gone out and they would never be warm again. When day came others jumped off their roofs in the belief that divine messengers would lift Immortal Snake to heaven and they would be carried along. The world must end, they thought, for no Immortal Snake had ever died a natural death, and now there were no Readers to appoint a new one.

Soon, however, joy replaced terror, for the word went out from the Nine Rings that the people themselves would choose their ruler. As for the choice, no one even had to discuss it. Tribute of Angels became the new Immortal Snake. In a ceremony designed by his beloved, he lay face down on the Plaza of Celestial Glory. One by one the ministers, heads of the noble families, and even village leaders sprinkled him with rose oil, calling "Rise up, beloved of God. Rise up." Finally, Wiser Than Heaven herself took the body in her arms, like a mother sheltering a dead child. "Rise up, rise up," she said. "Awaken to your people. Rise up, Immortal Snake!" Now he opened his eyes, and kissed her, and the celebrations began.

Under the rule of the new Immortal Snake the land of Mirror of God became even more powerful, more loved and admired. Its empire now stretched across the world. When drought or locusts destroyed crops people everywhere suffered, except in Mirror of God, for they had taken the best of every nation's plants and livestock and spices.

For twenty-two years Immortal Snake, who had been Tribute of Angels, ruled his people. And then the sun hid his face, for the Snake became ill.

Day after day Wiser Than Heaven sat alongside him. He lay now on the same narrow bed he'd requested for his quarters so long ago. When she joined him, there was more than enough room for both of them, for it was as if each had vanished and a single being replaced them. It had always been like this. In their glory days it was as if a star came to lie among mortals. Now it looked like the union of light and shadow, for the great storyteller was nearly gone.

She was sitting alongside his bed on the tenth night of his illness when he turned toward her and whispered, "Can you see the sky?"

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"Yes, of course," she said as she glanced up at the high window above the bed.

"Tell me what is written there."

She began to cry, the first time in days. "I'm sorry," she managed to say. "I don't know."

"It doesn't matter," he whispered. "It was all decided such a very long time ago." He managed to turn his head and look at her. His voice so soft she had to bend close, he said, "I should never have come here. I should have thrown myself into the sea."

"No!" she said. "Don't say that. Please."

"I thought of it. The night before I arrived. I couldn't do it, even then I could feel you calling to me."

"I don't understand."

Instead of answering he closed his eyes. His breath seemed to flutter in the air just above his mouth. Wiser Than Heaven cried out and pressed her mouth down on his, as if she could trap him inside his body. Too late. Tribute of Angels, who was now Immortal Snake, had returned forever to the world of story.

Wiser Than Heaven stayed with the body for three days. When they finally pulled her away she returned to the small room where she had lived before she met her storyteller.

Across the land, people rubbed their faces and even their entire bodies with ashes. Many refused to eat, while they stopped all work and recited stories from the authorized collections. There was no panic, however. It was God's will, they reassured each other, and waited for the moment when the ministers and wise men would choose a new Immortal Snake.

Only — who would they choose?

Wiser Than Heaven had three sons. The oldest said, "I am the first born. By right the land and all the power should go to me."

The middle son said, "My brother only cares about himself. I have served the people all my life. The power should go to me."

The youngest said, "I was my father's favorite. All power belongs to me."

Each one appealed to Wiser Than Heaven but she refused to speak with them, or to the ministers who begged her for a decision. Each of the brothers gathered allies, spread rumors, made promises. The factions

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began to battle each other, first through rumors, and then assassinations, and soon armed crowds were fighting each other.

Battalions from the Army of Heaven rushed home, supposedly to stop the fighting, but even before they arrived their commanders had chosen one side or another. Civil war flashed across the land. Finally, Wiser Than Heaven realized she must do something. She summoned her sons, only to have them refuse to be in the same room with each other for fear of assassination. So she saw them separately, and pleaded with each one to give up the fight for the sake of the people. Each one explained that too much had happened, that when he began the struggle he did so for his own glory, but now he continued for the good of the nation.

The conflict was never decided. In the second year, with bodies clogging rivers, and whole cities burned, and dead children tossed into the branches of trees, an even greater calamity fell upon the people. From all sides, from the sea, the mountains, the desert, a great army invaded Mirror of God, formerly known as Written in the Sky. Made up of soldiers from all the countries Mirror of God had conquered or dominated, the Grand Coalition was led by a young Emperor of Mud and Glory. He stood on a boat with black sails, his face radiant, his body raised up on stilts, and beside him, in an ancient robe thickened with dirt, stood a bent figure who may have been a man or may have been a woman.

The Coalition slaughtered the last remnants of the once terrible Army of Heaven. They killed half the women and almost all the men, and took the children as slaves. In a short time all three brothers were executed in the Plaza of Celestial Glory. Their mother disguised herself as one of the old women who tend the fires of the dead, and threw herself on the flames of her youngest son.

The soldiers tore down the Nine Rings of Heaven and Earth, they smashed every building, every statue, they burned down farms and villages. Then they plowed salt into the cracked earth so that nothing could grow there. At the very end, the Emperor of Mud and Glory stood among the blood-soaked ashes and proclaimed, "God has cursed this place forever and ever."

That was the end of the land of Written in the Sky. Once it was the most powerful of all the world's peoples. Now nothing remains of it but sand and misery and a hatred whose origin no one even remembers — that,

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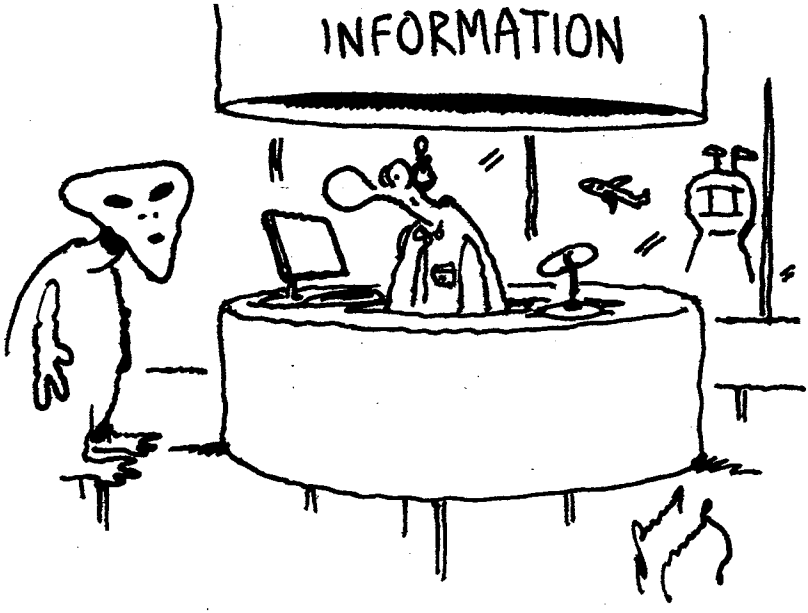
and the secret traces of a storyteller who was both its glory and its destruction.

Author's Note

The story of *Immortal Snake* was inspired by a very old tale, published early in the twentieth century by the mythographer Leo Frobenius. Known as "The Ruin of Kasch," the story describes how a mysterious storyteller slave overthrew the age-old power of the priests. As with Written in the Sky, Kasch became rich and powerful under the rule of the storyteller, only to plummet to destruction in the next generation. Its enemies cursed the land and the people, so that forever after they would be plagued by barrenness, war, and the hatred of their neighbors. Kasch was an actual place in the ancient world, its location in Africa precisely known. The modern name for the land of Kasch is Darfur.



"Hi, I'm Bzzzzlt Zmmloog. You paged me."

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Matchmaker, Matchmaker, Make Me a Text

"In an attempt to give readers some real-life romance, mass market fiction house Dorchester is partnering with the on-line dating service Cupid.com to co-host 'speed dating' events in five cities starting next month. Attendees will get copies of Dorchester books, dating tips from Dorchester authors — and, in an ideal situation, a mate, too."

—"Readers Find Love," by Lynn Andriani, *PW Daily*, April 13, 2006.

IT JUST wasn't working out between Sheila and me. After three years of marriage punctuated by endlessly recurring arguments, accusations and tearful reconciliations, I was finally ready to call it quits.

Speaking firmly but with no hostility, I brought up the subject of divorce one morning at the breakfast table.

Sheila took it well. After all, this particular outcome to our turbulent relationship could hardly have come as a surprise to her.

Staring soberly at her coffee as she tinkled a spoon around the inside of her cup, Sheila said, "Sure, Stan. We could break up. That would be easy enough. But there's one last thing we could try — if you're willing."

"What's that?" I said, my curiosity piqued.

Sheila looked up at me with a tentatively hopeful expression. "We could call the publisher."

"Publisher?"

Sheila grabbed a paperback from an adjacent counter. The butter-stained, crumb-sprinkled cover depicted a man and a woman torridly grappling against a background of medieval warfare between peasants and barbarians. The type on the cover announced *Savage Vandal Kisses*, by Faustina Chambliss.

"Don't you remember? Dorchester Publishing. They introduced us."

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Memories from four years ago flooded vividly back to me.

Sheila and I had met through an on-line dating service, during a special promotion they had been holding in conjunction with a publisher of romance novels, Dorchester Books.

Sheila was a big fan of that genre, although I had no interest in such sappy stuff. Her affection for such reading material had not waned over the years, and I was by now quite familiar with at least the names of her favorite authors, and a little of what went on between those lurid covers.

Back then, Sheila and I became instantly infatuated with each other during our speed date, and marriage followed shortly thereafter. Perhaps too swiftly, given the revelations of our subsequent incompatability.

Sheila flipped the paperback open to a house advertisement at the back. "Dorchester has just started a counseling service for all the couples who met through their earlier dating program. Who would be better able to help us? And it's completely free — "

"How does it work? Would we have to go to their headquarters? Where are they anyhow?"

"New York. No, there's no travel necessary. They send a counselor to us...."

"I don't know. It all sounds pretty weird...."

"Stan, please? For me?"

Looking at my wife, with her dewy eyes and trembling chin, I saw again what had first attracted me to her. A small, dim spark began to kindle in my heart. Perhaps there was some way to salvage what we had once enjoyed, and to have some happy future together.

"All right, let's give it a try."

I must say that my lateness for work that morning was a good sign of possible improvements to come.

Just a little over a week later, on a Saturday, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it!" Sheila called out, dashing through the house. I followed more sedately.

There on the doorstep stood a woman whose face I recognized from numerous appearances in various Dorchester newsletters and website links.

Faustina Chambliss.

Faustina Chambliss was the general shape of a fire hydrant, and not much bigger. Beneath auburn curls, her plump, animated face reminded me of a wheel of strawberry cheesecake. She wore a pants suit whose fabric replicated a Henri Rousseau jungle landscape. She held

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the strap of a large bag slung over one shoulder. She could have been any age from twenty-seven to sixty-seven.

Beside her rested a steamer trunk three times her size. An airport shuttle van was pulling away down our driveway.

"Hello, lovebirds! All your romantic travails are over! Faustina is here!"

Sheila's expression matched that of a teenager encountering some adored pop star in the flesh. "Oh, Miss Chambliss, I never thought — It's so wonderful you could answer our request. Please, come in, come in."

The woman swept past us, waving a hand studded with chunky rings in my direction. "Get Faustina's trunk, young man, if you would be so kind."

I was quietly fuming as I manhandled the big awkward trunk into the front parlor. It was obvious that this clownish woman would side entirely with Sheila, employing the common language they shared to put me down as the only villain in this whole affair.

Faustina Chambliss and Sheila were sitting side by side on the couch when I finished my sweaty task. The author had removed a laptop computer from her satchel. She had set the device up on the low table in front of the couch.

"Marvelous!" Faustina Chambliss exclaimed. "You've got a large-screen TV! I had been hoping you would. It will help our therapy immensely. Please — Stan, is it? — could you pop this DVD into your player?"

Muttering, I took the DVD, slotted it into the player, and brought the remote control to Faustina Chambliss. I expected her to start up whatever bit of counseling video she had for us immediately. But to my surprise, she didn't.

"Please, sit down, Stan. Faustina wants to get to know all about you and Sheila and your recent soul-hardships."

Reluctantly, self-consciously, slowly, I began talking, describing how our marriage had gone bad. Sheila chimed in at frequent intervals, and our separate monologues actually began to form a dialogue, our first in many months.

"But you never said — "

"How was I supposed to know — "

"That was so foolish — "

"You could have tried harder — "

Throughout our conversation, Faustina Chambliss encouraged us with various positive exhortations. And all the while, her pudgy fingers

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flew across the keyboard of her laptop.

Finally, as we began to wind down, Faustina Chambliss signaled the next stage of her counseling mission.

"All right, dears, Faustina believes she understands your situation quite well. She now knows just the sequence you need. Please go to the trunk."

We went to the trunk, and I opened it up.

Inside, on rods, hung dozens of elaborate costumes, more than seemed possible given the space.

Faustina Chambliss directed us with a red-nailed finger. "Men's outfits on the left, women's on the right. Find the pirate and heiress costumes. They'll be on matching hangers."

Sheila and I took out the designated clothing.

"Now put them on. Oh, don't be shy! Faustina has seen everything!"

We stripped to our underwear and donned the new outfits.

A DVD menu had appeared on the TV screen, and Faustina Chambliss was cursoring down it until she hit the line that read *Bride of the Briney Boudoir*.

"Stand facing the screen, please."

We did so, and Faustina Chambliss tapped PLAY.

The TV came alive with a shipboard scene. The huge plasma screen made me feel as if I were actually there. A pirate captain and an heiress were engaged in a confrontation. Their speech showed up as text, like karaoke.

"Now, play out the scene, please, sweetlings!"

Awkwardly, Sheila and I began mimicking the actors.

"You're a right hell cat, Lady Fiona! But I'll shatter your pride — and your maidenhead! — ere we reach Barbados!"

"Nay, Captain Hardmast! For this dirk I clasp ever to my bosom will rob thee of your velvet prize in a gush of blood!"

By the time the scene was over — probably only three or four minutes — I found my heart racing and my breath labored. Sheila and I were locked in an unrequited embrace, faces just inches apart.

Breaking the spell, Faustina Chambliss said, "Well done, children! But no time to indulge yet! Onward! Deep into Faustina's characters!"

We changed costumes — I was a priest, and Sheila looked like Stevie Nicks — and Faustina Chambliss clicked on *The Witches of West Palm Beach*.

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"Why, Father Darling, how could I be a witch? Aren't I standing ever so close to this big old cross resting on your broad chest?"

"Your kind is cunning. But at the pool I saw the mark of Satan on your — on your shamelessly exposed buttocks!"

"Oh, really? Would you care to confirm that now?"

In short order, we worked our way through *Sagebrush Sorrows, Executive Passions, Harlot of the Highlands, Geishas Never Cry, Minefields of the Heart, Born to Love Rock Stars, Timeslip Temptress, Hollywood Heartaches* and *Intergalactic Desires*.

All the while, I felt myself growing strangely close to Sheila, as if seeing her in all these permutations had opened up new vistas to our relationship. I knew suddenly that never again would I take her for granted, or be bored with our life together.

For the last-named scenario, I was costumed like a hard-bitten loner of a starship pilot, and Sheila like a privileged princess.

"You nearly got us killed back there!"

"I did not!"

We began throwing wild, ineffectual punches at each other. But the fight soon evolved into a fevered clinch. We fell to the floor, kissing. Shreds of costume flew through the air as I ripped Sheila's alien bodice open.

During our love-tussle, I vaguely noticed that Faustina Chambliss's fingers never stopped on the keyboard of her machine, nor did her pleased exclamations.

"Brilliant, Faustina, brilliant! What material! Your next three novels are all right here!"

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Alex Jeffers was sixteen when Robert Silverberg bought his first story. He has gone on to publish one novel, Safe as Houses, *as well as short stories in anthologies such as* Universe 3 *and* His 2. *His* F&SF *debut is a striking tale set in the Middle East. Mr. Jeffers notes that he is working on a long novel called* Dreamherder *to which this story is connected. He says he expects to finish the novel any decade now.*

Firooz and His Brother

By Alex Jeffers

THEY WERE ALL MERCHANTS, the men of his family, caravan masters, following the long road from Samarkand to the great city of Baghdad at the center of the world. A youth on his first journey, Firooz often did not know quite what was required of him. Because he wrote a handsome, legible hand and could do sums in his head, before they left Samarkand he had helped his uncle prepare the inventory: silks, porcelains, spices from the distant east; cottons, dyes, spices from the hot lands south of the mountains; carpets, woolens, leather and hides, books from local workshops. On the road, such skills commanded little respect. He could shoot, could manage both short and long blades, but the paid guards knew him for a liability if bandits were to strike: he was his uncle's heir, they had been instructed to protect him. He made coffee when they camped, tended and groomed the horses of his uncle and the other merchants, cared for their hounds. Mostly he felt superfluous.

Along one of the many desolate stretches when the plodding caravan was days away from the town it had last passed through and the next, his

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uncle told him to take his bow and one of the hounds, ride away from the bustle and clamor of the caravan to hunt. Fresh game would be a treat.

Before they had gone very far, the hound sighted a small herd of deer grazing on the scrub. When Firooz loosed the hound, she coursed across the plain, silent. Holding his bow ready and drawing an arrow from the quiver, Firooz spurred his horse after. On an abrupt shift of the breeze, the deer caught the hunters' scent. Lifting their heads as one, they turned and fled, leaping and bounding across the plain.

The hound had her eye on a particular animal she must have sensed to be weaker or more confused than the others. She pursued it relentlessly, leading Firooz farther and farther from the caravan, into a broken country where strange spires of jagged rock thrust up through the loose soil, twisted little trees clinging to their flanks. All the other deer had vanished. The young buck they followed cantered nimbly among the spires and towers and bastions. Steep shadows fell from tall spires and scarps, filling narrow passages with dusk. Springs and streams flowed here, watering the soil and nourishing seeming gardens of wildflowers in bloom, more lovely than anything Firooz had seen since leaving Samarkand. There were trees as well, protected from the winds of the plain, tall and straight and broad, and lush stretches of green turf. If he had not been intent on the deer's white rump and the hound's feathered tail, Firooz should have been astounded.

The deer's strength was failing. It staggered, leapt forward again, ducked around a steep formation. The hound sped after it. Wrenching his mare around the corner, Firooz entered the deep, cool shade of a woods cramped narrowly between two arms of rock and slowed to a walk. He saw neither deer nor hound among the trees. There was nowhere to go but forward, however. The mare's hooves fell muffled on leaf mold. Firooz did not recognize the trees.

After a time, he heard barking ahead and spurred the horse into an easy trot. The barks broke up, became distinct: two different voices. Over the hound's melodious baying, which echoed from the high walls of the canyon, sounded the sharp, warning yaps of a second dog.

Firooz was ready, when he passed between tall trees into a small clearing, to rein in the mare and leap to the ground between the two animals. He grabbed for the collar of the sand-colored bitch but she,

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startled and snarling, eluded him, bounded over the sweet grass and leapt upon the other, smaller dog. Courageous or stubborn, it shook her off the first time and stood its ground, growling ferociously. It was scarcely more than a puppy. Wrapping the excess fabric of his jallabiya about his forearm, Firooz stepped forward to separate them but stumbled and fell. By the time he regained his feet, the bitch hound had torn open the puppy's throat and stood over her fallen foe, jaws red and dripping. Still growling, the puppy lay on its side, panting from the new scarlet mouth in its throat as well as the one it had been born with, bleeding heavily from both.

Saddened by the bad end to such outsize courage, Firooz cuffed the hound aside and severed the younger dog's spine with a single stroke of his Damascus blade. For a long moment, he regarded the small corpse, while the hound lay at her ease, licking her chops, and the mare cropped at the grass between her feet. Clearly, the dead dog was not wild, native to the desolation — had been cared for, tended, for its woolly black coat gleamed where not matted and dulled by blood and it appeared well nourished. Heavy shoulders and sturdy limbs suggested it had not been a courser; though not fully grown, it would not have become large enough to threaten big predators, bears, wolves, leopards: it was surely not a hunter's dog.

Puzzled and regretful, Firooz did not at first properly hear or understand the muffled wailing that rose almost between his feet. The hound had returned, to nose interestedly at the corpse. He shoved her away again and gently lifted the dead dog aside.

It had died protecting its charge. In a perfectly sized depression in the grass lay the crying babe, naked but for spatters of the dog's scarlet blood. Firooz's first, terrible impulse was to kill it, too, and ride away.

The hound was back again, licking the blood from the baby's perfect skin. Her soft, damp tongue seemed to calm it — him — and after a time the babe ceased wailing. Looking away, Firooz cleaned and sheathed his sword. He didn't know what to do.

He knew what to do. Removing his rolled prayer rug from the mare's back, he wrapped the dead dog in it and fastened it again behind the saddle. The horse bridled and shied at the scent of blood. He took a clean scarf from the saddle bag. Kneeling by the baby, he nudged the hound aside for the last time. He moistened a corner of the scarf to wipe away the

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remaining traces of blood. The quiet baby stared up at him with a knowing, toothless smile. Picking up the baby, Firooz wound the scarf about his pliant body — somehow he knew how to hold him so he didn't complain. Firooz couldn't figure out how to mount the mare while holding the baby, so he took the reins, called the hound to heel, and set out walking back to the caravan. Along the way, he decided to name the baby Haider, after his grandfather.

Stranger things than discovering an abandoned child in the wilderness had occurred in the hundreds of years since caravans began traveling between Samarkand and Baghdad. The doctor who accompanied the caravan proclaimed Haider fit. A nursing goat was found to provide milk. The dead dog was buried with dignity, its grave marked by a cairn of stones beside the road. Firooz's uncle said he should raise Haider as his son, to which Firooz replied, "I am unmarried and too young to be a father. He shall be my brother."

Haider grew and prospered. Firooz, too, prospered. In time, he married his uncle's daughter as had been arranged in their childhood. In time, he took his uncle's place at the head of the caravan. His wife did not travel with him, but his brother Haider did. In all this time, Haider had become a handsome, pious, merry young man; he, too, was appropriately and happily wed, and when the brothers departed for distant Baghdad their wives remained together in the comfortable Samarkand house, caring for Haider's children, two small boys and a lovely girl. For the elder brother's marriage, though happy, remained childless: his wife quickened readily enough but always lost the baby before its time. Their family — indeed, the unhappy not-mother herself — urged Firooz to take a second wife, but always he refused. He loved his wife well, he said, and as for heirs he had his young brother and his brother's sons.

The caravan was heading again for Baghdad. Reaching the spot marked by the dog's grave's cairn, Firooz called a halt, although it was scarcely noon. There was a spring here and often game nearby. He called his brother to him. "You have often heard of how, by the will of God, I found you," he said. "We have passed the grave of your first protector many times, but I have never shown you the place where I found you, not so far away. While our companions hunt, let us go there."

They took with them two fine hounds, descendants of the first bitch.

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Now and again they sighted game but, though the hounds complained, did not loose them. Firooz felt he knew his heading exactly although it was now twenty-one years since he followed the long-lost buck deer. They entered the broken country, then the region of strange spires and canyons and lush vegetation. Haider exclaimed at the beauty of the place, but Firooz felt an odd urgency pulling at him and led his brother on without pausing. When they came to the narrowly enclosed woods, the hounds strained at their leashes and, as they progressed farther among the tree shadows, bayed.

They were answered by furious barking, of a timbre Firooz, twenty-one years later, recognized. Keeping a strong hand on his hound's leash, he spurred his horse forward.

Awaiting them in the clearing, stalwart, as if the years had not passed, was a half-grown dog fleeced like a black lamb, which Firooz could not distinguish from the dog he had killed and buried. The two men dismounted hastily. Without needing to be asked, Firooz took the leash of the second straining hound. The black dog continued to bark as Haider gingerly approached, but these were clearly cries of joy and welcome. Falling to his knees, Haider embraced the animal. When he looked up at his brother, Firooz saw tears on his cheeks. "I seem to know this dog," he said.

"It cannot be the same one," said Firooz, but he was confused by this marvel.

Properly introduced, the hounds made friends with the black dog, which Haider began calling Iman as if he had always known her name. Iman gratefully accepted several pieces of dried meat, and showed the men a spring and small pond as artfully placed under the overhanging cliff as if an architect had designed it. Beyond the high scarps around this place, the sun was lowering. Firooz and his brother washed at the spring, laid out their prayer rugs toward Holy Mecca, and made the declaration of their faith. Firooz's rug still bore faint stains of blood.

Haider built a small fire and prepared coffee. The hobbled horses grazed contentedly on grass sweeter than any they had encountered since departing Samarkand, while the three dogs lay about — Iman always near her master — panting, happy. The brothers reclined with their coffee, talking of matters of no importance, but not speaking of marvels.

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After, heated with the spirit of the coffee, they removed their garments and embraced. They were men, they were fond of each other, they were long away from their wives. No words needed to be spoken as each gave pleasure to the other, as none had ever been spoken.

Yet afterward, when they woke from slumber and lay side by side, content, Haider said, "My brother, do you truly not regret having no children?"

Firooz considered. It was not a question he had not had to answer before. "It saddens me," he said, "that my wife cannot bear our children safely, for she so wishes to be a mother. And yet, one day she may, for I myself was my father's late, unexpected child, after his wife had been barren for many years. As for my own wishes — it was God's will to grant me a brother after both my parents had died. My uncle told me to call you *son*, but it was a brother God gave me and I have never not been glad of you. Now, moreover, there are your sons and daughter at home, whom I could not value more if they were my own."

"This is what you say, and it is a fine answer. Is it what you feel?" Haider rose to his feet, as naked as the day Firooz found him. As Firooz admired him, Haider said, "I believe I can give you a child of your own blood — and mine," and as Firooz watched, amazed, the handsome young man was transformed into a beautiful young woman. "Ask no questions," she said, kneeling at his side and placing her hand on his lips, "for I cannot answer them." She kissed his mouth.

They made love again, and it was not so very different than before, except that Haider gave only, did not take. Indeed, when he remembered it later, Firooz felt he preferred the manliness of Haider as he had been or the different womanliness of his own wife.

When both were spent, the woman who had been his brother kissed him again, and rose, and gathered up the garments of a man. As she drew them on, her form appeared to melt within the fabric, assuming again the guise of Firooz's brother Haider. Beard grew on cheeks now more wide and flat, around lips more thin and hard. The long sable glory of the woman's hair drifted away, leaving only black stubble on Haider's well-shaped skull. "We should return to the camp," he said, offering a hand to help Firooz up.

Grasping it, Firooz held the small, smooth hand of the woman. He

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started and, as he blinked, saw for an instant the woman encumbered in outsize man's clothing, but the vision fled when his brother's gripping hand and strong right arm hauled him to his feet. Numbed by astonishment, frightened, he stumbled about, donning his own clothes while Haider rolled up their rugs and repacked the coffee service. The younger man mounted his horse easily, called to the dog, Iman, who came readily, keeping a sane distance from the horse's hooves.

Haider appeared to remain Haider, a man, for the rest of the journey to Baghdad. Still, Firooz continued troubled. Perhaps it had been simply a dream, his brother's transformation — they did not speak of it, nor came there again an occasion that he might touch his brother, see him whole and nude and prove that vision false. Yet sometimes, regarding Haider over an evening's fire, Firooz thought the younger man looked ill, drawn and pale; sometimes, as they rode, the straight-backed youth appeared for an instant to slump in his saddle and to resemble more a weary woman than an energetic, cheerful man. The black dog — which followed Haider everywhere, received choice morsels from his bowl, sometimes rode perched before him on the saddle, held safe by his strong arm — would bark, Haider would smile and shake his head, and Firooz blink.

In the great city of Baghdad, Firooz conducted his business out of the caravansary maintained by the merchants of Samarkand, selling, buying, bartering, trading. It was already a profitable venture. For some days business occupied him to the exclusion of any other concern. Then a late-arriving caravan brought him a sad letter from his wife in Samarkand: she had not told him before his departure that she believed herself with child and it was just as well for, by God's will, she had lost this baby too, soon after he left. Yet she was well, recovered from the injury to her body if not the wound to her soul; her sister (by which she meant Haider's wife) was a constant comfort, Haider's children constant joys. She awaited her husband's return with fond resolve.

Haider entered Firooz's chamber as he finished reading the letter and set it aside, his eyes wet. "You are once again not to be an uncle," Firooz said.

"I know. My wife, also, wrote to me." Haider poured cool water for his brother, offered a scented kerchief to wipe his eyes. "I grieve with you."

Firooz drank. "Nevertheless," he said, "I meant what I said, the day you found Iman." (Hearing her name, the dog yapped, before curling up for

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a nap.) "I should like a child, for my poor wife's sake, but I have no need of one." He held out a hand for his brother to grip.

Though Haider's well-known, well-loved face did not change, it was a woman's hand Firooz grasped, small boned and soft, and a woman's full, quickening belly to which his palm was pressed. "You are to be a father, brother," Haider said in his deep, full voice, "and I a mother." He held Firooz's hand to his belly a moment longer, exerting a man's strength to prevent his recoiling. "Although I should prefer your wife raise the child, as I have other responsibilities."

"How is this possible?"

"Do you question the will of merciful and compassionate God?"

"Are you a jinni? An ifrit?"

"I am a creature of earth even as yourself, not a being of fire. I am a man: your brother. And a woman — not your sister nor your wife, but the mother of your unborn child. Firooz, my dear, there is no more I can tell you. I mean you only good."

Firooz recoiled when Haider approached again.

"I came," Haider said with a gentle smile, "to take you away from your new sorrow and your weary business. Tomorrow we go to the Friday Mosque to say our prayers among the ummah. This evening I intend to dedicate to your comfort and ease. Come, brother. This other matter need not concern you for some months yet. Come."

Still troubled, Firooz gave in. Leaving the disappointed Iman behind, Haider led Firooz out into the streets of the city, first to a hammam as splendid as the finest mosque. Here they bathed — Firooz felt immeasurable relief when he saw that Haider, wearing no more than a cloth around his hips, appeared no less masculine than he ought, his belly flat and firm, his chest and shoulders broad. Attendants massaged them in turn; others shaved the hair from their scalps and bodies, as was meet, oiled and perfumed their beards; still others brought coffee when at length they reclined on soft couches and did not speak.

From the hammam, they went on to the house of a gentleman of their acquaintance, an elderly merchant who left the traveling to his sons and nephews, where they were fed dishes from distant lands and offered conversation of the kind to be encountered only in great cities.

Finally, pleasantly weary and replete, they returned to Firooz's rooms

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at the caravansary. Iman greeted them with great joy, not lessened by the little bowl of tidbits Haider had smuggled under his robes from their dinner. Firooz seated himself again before his accounts and inventories.

"No," said Haider, firm. Drawing his brother to his feet, he undressed Firooz and laid him down on the couch, removed his own clothing, blew out the lamp.

Making love, Firooz was uncertain from moment to moment whether the person in his arms was a strong, slender, forceful man or a soft, yielding, fecund woman. For one night, it seemed, it didn't matter.

A month later, they departed Baghdad at the head of a caravan laden with the goods of all western Islam as well as infidel Europe and savage Africa. Some months into the journey, they came again to the cairn of stones by the road and here again they halted. As camp was set up, the black dog Iman became agitated. She circled the grave of her predecessor several times, then, barking and whining, made Haider accompany her in investigating it again. She led him to the edge of the encampment and gazed long across the plain where, beyond the horizon, lay the place she had been found. At last, Haider went to his brother, the dog whining and yapping at his heels, and said, "I must go. Will you come with me?"

The place, when they came to it, had not changed, but Haider had. Dismounting from his horse, he was no longer a sturdy young merchant but a frail, weary woman whose inappropriate, ill-fitting garments did nothing to disguise the belly round and full as a melon, the brimming breasts like ripe pears. Frightened as much for as of her, Firooz ran to take her arm. "It is early, I would have thought," she said. "I should have known God would lead me here, again, to bear my child."

"There is no midwife," Firooz protested, "no shelter."

"We shall manage."

Her labor was short, though she bit her lips to bleeding from the pain and clenched her fists so tight as to leave bruises on Firooz's hand and cause the dog that lay on her other side, shoulders under her hand, to yelp. When his son came, Firooz was ready to catch him, marveling, weeping, to lift him, all bloody and damp, to his cheek. He severed the cord with the blade that had killed Iman's predecessor. The mother pushed out the afterbirth onto the rug stained by much older blood and lay back, resting her aching legs. "Is he beautiful?" she asked.

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"He is beautiful," the father said, tender, cleaning the baby with fresh water from the spring.

"Give him my breast," she said, "for I think I shall not keep it long."

While the baby suckled, the man washed the woman, prepared a clean place for her to lie and coffee to soothe and revive her. When the baby slept, tiny hand curled around a lock of Iman's fur, the woman rose slowly to her feet. "Bring me my clothing, please, Firooz," she said.

As she dressed, the transformation occurred, so subtly Firooz could not determine the instant he saw no longer the mother of his son but his brother Haider. The young man knelt by his nephew but did not touch. "What will you call your son?"

"Khayrat."

Haider smiled. The old word meant *good deed*. "A fine name." He stood again. "We should return to camp. It will be dark soon."

"Will you carry him?"

"No, brother. I meant him for you."

There was no other man in the caravan who remembered Firooz's finding Haider twenty-two years before, none to call his finding Khayrat other than good fortune for fatherless babe and childless father alike. When, months later in Samarkand, Firooz's wife took Khayrat from her husband's arms, she was nearly reconciled to her own barrenness.

Haider never again, to his brother's knowledge, became a woman; never, in word or action, admitted to being more than Khayrat's fond uncle. The dog Iman was spoiled and petted by children and adults alike, though she never forgot where her love and loyalty lay, never slept where she could not hear Haider's breath. She bore litters to passing dogs, and every puppy resembled her, and when after a long life at last she died, there was another fleecy black bitch to be his companion.

The years passed, between Samarkand and Baghdad, bringing the family instants of joy and good fortune, sorrow and bad luck, as God had written in their fates. Haider's wife died of a fever, her children still young. The family mourned but went on, as it must. Haider did not marry again. When they were old enough, his sons — and later Khayrat — journeyed with the caravan to and from Baghdad. Grown to manhood, they led it, and their fathers remained at home.

They sat in their garden by a singing fountain, Firooz and his brother.

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Haider stroked the flank of his dog and said, "Long ago, Firooz, I told you I was no jinni or ifrit, but a creature of earth like yourself. But unlike, as well. Beneficent and compassionate God made many worlds, interleaved like the pages of a great book. Some lie as close to another as any two surahs of the Holy Qur'an, others as distant as the beginning from the end. In some, things that are impossible here are commonplace; in others, everything we take for granted is entirely unknown. There are worlds that contain no miracles at all, worlds where a new miracle is born every morning. The earth from which God molded my ancestors, brother, lies in another world. It is time, I think, for my dog and me to go home."

"Haider?" Firooz gripped his brother's hand to prevent him from rising.

"I believe there is only one Paradise, Firooz. We shall meet again in not too long. Let me go, brother." Tender, he kissed the back of Firooz's hand and raised it to touch his own forehead. "I cannot love you less, here or elsewhere."

"I should die before you!" Firooz closed his eyes, desolate.

"It is not to death I am going. Give my blessing and my love to my sons." Gentle, he removed his fingers from Firooz's hand, kissed his brow. When his brother opened his eyes again, dog and man were gone as if they had never set foot on the earth of Firooz's world. The elder brother wept, and then, as he must, went on living until he died.

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Albert Cowdrey's affection for genre magazines has made itself evident before, most notably in "Twilight States" (July 2005). But never before have we encountered anything like what happened with this story. Between his sending us this and our publishing it now, the title magazine has been returned to life! The new editor of Thrilling Wonder Stories, *Winston Engle, most likely is unaware of Mr. Cowdrey's story. Indeed, he probably thinks he acted of his own volition.*

But if we see new stories from Mr. Cowdrey with titles like Galaxy, Argosy, *or* Super-Science, *well, don't be surprised at what ensues.*

Thrilling Wonder Stories

By Albert E. Cowdrey

HE CAME FROM SOMEPLACE else—anybody could see that. Even Farley himself.

That first morning of summer vacation, with Tommy already outside bellowing, "FAARR!" and wanting to play, Farley turned aside on his way to the front door. Papa was at work selling encyclopedias and Mama had gone shopping, so Farley seized the opportunity to slip into their bedroom.

In the brown shadows, behind the closed drapes, with only the mirror on Mama's vanity glimmering, he threw himself facedown on her side of the double bed and in a kind of intoxication inhaled her scent, a compound of flesh and perspiration, vanishing cream and Chanel No. 5. He could walk into a room where she'd been and detect it in the air. Somehow, he felt, the scent was Mama herself, and it stirred him in some unsayable way.

Tommy shouted again. With a last sniff, Farley jumped up and turned to go. His shadowy form was caught in the round vanity mirror, and he paused long enough to stare at his face. *Oh yeah,* he thought, *somebody did a job on poor old Papa.*

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Farley's olive skin and long sharp nose and big ears with the lobes welded to his jaws were nothing like the pale reddish man who slept beside Mama. When Farley was little, he'd believed he was Papa's son. No longer. Papa was just the sitter. Farley's father was a man from...Mars.

He smiled, half believing it. *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, his favorite reading, was full of Martians and some of them looked remarkably like Farley. Now, arching his brows, making his eyes glare, he twisted his lips and made his evil face.

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh," he chuckled, raising his long-fingered hands like pitchforks. If people knew who his real father was! If people only knew! Then they'd be ascared....

From outside came "FARRRRRRRRR!" again, and he dropped the game of evil like a rejected toy, slammed through the front door and sprang into midair off the end of the porch. It was summer and Farley was twelve and he could only spare so much time wondering who — or even what — his real father was.

He and Tommy set out for the canal, gossiping.

"Mama and Papa had another fight last night," Farley confided. "He didn't sell enough encyclopedias to be Salesman of the Month."

"Your folks fight a lot, don't they, Far?"

"Don't yours?"

"Sometimes," Tommy said cautiously. "Not too much."

"Last night Mama got into the Jim Beam," said Farley. "She was really hot."

The fighting used to bother him until he realized that Papa wasn't his father. Now he could look on from the sidelines and tell himself he enjoyed the show.

"Who won?"

"Oh, Mama always wins. At least she gets in the first word, the middle word, and the last word."

"What does your Papa do?"

"He takes it."

The neighborhood lay baking in the hot sun — Cape Cods and Spanish-style houses and Sears Roebuck houses and diminutive Taras for junior executives who liked to think they were living in the Old South

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instead of the new one. All the windows and doors stood open in the summer heat, and the sounds of radio soap operas mingled with Nat King Cole's cane-syrup voice singing, *Are you warm, are you real, Mona Lisa*?

The lawns were cushioned in deep green turf and decorated with grinning elves and silver reflecting globes. Farley and Tommy bent and stared into one globe to watch their faces balloon out and their noses stretch. Farley's was so long anyway that Tommy called him "Elephant Nose" and they had a brief fight, rolling over and over in the hot dry grass.

Farley won, of course, sitting on Tommy and threatening him with his big-knuckled fists until he took back what he'd said. Farley won most of his fights; at school he'd almost been expelled for giving another boy a savage beating. A teacher had called him "a goddamn psycho."

But this wasn't a serious fight — lucky for Tommy.

The houses dwindled and vanished at the edge of the marshes, where a drainage canal with sloping concrete sides divided the tame from the wild. The boys walked down the slope with one leg bent and one leg straight until they reached the man-high tunnel of a storm drain. The marsh, the canal, and the drain were their playground; every attempt to lure them to official New Orleans Recreation Department sites met instant rejection.

A year ago, Far had tried scaring Tommy by telling him that an alligator lived in the tunnel, eating rats to stay alive. But Tommy had seen the alligators at the Audubon Zoo and they were anything but scary, lying in their pool like a pile of huge jackstraws, inert as logs and dirty as laundry.

So Far changed the tunnel beast to a monster with lots of fangs and a smell like rotten eggs. Its name was Garmusk.

Since then Garmusk had come and gone, depending on their moods. Sometimes even Far believed that *something* lived in the tunnel; at other times, it was just a joke between them. Today Garmusk returned when they found a dead dog lying beside the canal.

"Tonight, Garmusk, you know? He'll come out the tunnel and eat it," Farley proclaimed.

"Wow," said Tommy uneasily. "I guess you must know him pretty good if you know what he likes to eat."

"If you were all the time eating rats, wouldn't you like a nice dog for

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a change? I would," said Far, putting on his evil face, and Tommy produced a nervous giggle.

The storm drain was half-dark, cool and damp, the bottom shaped like a shallow V where a little stream of water always trickled, even on days as hot and dry as this one. Their voices waking echoes, they walked until the sunshine faded behind them and they could see, incredibly far off, like a dim star, the tiny light that marked the other exit on Elysian Fields Avenue.

They were talking about maybe, this time, going the whole distance when they heard a rustle, a soft splash, and a scraping sound on the concrete.

"GARMUSK!" Far yelled and the echoes resounded and they turned and ran wildly for the entrance.

Tommy actually outran Farley for once, popping out of the storm drain into the hot breathless sunlight a good four steps ahead of him. Panting, dripping sweat, they sank down on the hot concrete. Tommy, a slight narrow-chested boy with arms and legs like sticks, took a long time getting his breath.

"We better bring the dog into the tunnel for him to eat," said Farley. "Feed him up, soze he don't grab us next time."

While Tommy watched uneasily, Far picked up the dog, finding it still pretty fresh, and laid it just inside like a sacrifice. By now he'd recovered his courage, and he stood peering down the tunnel while his big hands wrestled each other, in a way he had when he was excited.

"We got to find more things for Garmusk," he said. "We got to feed him or he might come out and eat somebody."

Tommy thought privately that they should call the cops, but he didn't dare say so. Far's whole body was tense and quivering, like a high-tension wire stroked by wind.

"I wonder what else we can give him," he muttered. "Think about it, Tommy. I'll think about it, too."

That night at dinner Mama glared at Papa while Olivia, the colored cook, served them. Barely five feet tall, she radiated fury from her small body without saying a word.

The weather did nothing to cool her off. Usually the days were tropical this time of year, with heavy rain falling sometime between two

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and four in the afternoon. But no rain had fallen today or for weeks past. The heat accumulated in everything, in bricks and walks and slate roofs and even in the hinges of doors. As Olivia washed the dishes, Farley saw sweat stains spreading across her back.

When she was gone he tensed, expecting a fight. But all evening Mama and Papa gave each other the silent treatment. When he kissed them goodnight, they were both real sweet to him to underline their dislike of each other.

The night was stifling. Farley tried to read a story in *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, but the heat of the lamp was too much and he turned it off voluntarily, not even waiting to be yelled at. He lay on his bed, wearing three-button drawers and sweating from every pore.

Sounds of combat began to rise from the bedroom next door. Listening intently, he found out at last what the trouble was. Another promotion Papa hadn't gotten. Pretty soon Mama began to scream at him.

"Your problem is they know you too well!" she yelled. "They know what you're worth! Nothing!"

"Now wait a minute, Honey."

"You think I'm gonna sit on my goddamn ass all my life and wait for you?"

"Hold it down in there!" Farley shouted, producing dead silence.

When she said words like goddamn and ass he knew she'd been into the Jim Beam again. At times like that she totally forgot that he was in here, an innocent child, listening. Tomorrow she would apologize — not to Papa, of course: to Farley. He already knew how she'd stroke his head and say:

"Honey, I'm so sorry you had to hear all that bad language. I don't know what gets into me sometimes. You know, your Papa and I really do love each other."

Two truths, one lie. She *was* sorry, and when she was mad she *did* say things she wouldn't say otherwise. The rest was false. The only people Mama really loved were Farley and the man from Mars.

He had no sense of falling asleep, yet woke bathed in sweat. The breathless night had the after-twelve feeling. A little fice dog in the yard next door, an irritating animal named Cissy, was barking as she did all night, every night in hot weather.

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Farley got up and padded into the kitchen and got himself a glass and poured water and a shot of Jim into it. Then he went to the window and looked out. The metallic light of a perfect summer moon covered the back yard and the neighbors' rooftops. The shadows were profoundly black, and he wondered how shadows looked on Mars, with the sun so far away and the air so thin and the big brilliant stars of deep space glittering in the black water of the Grand Canal.

Meanwhile Cissy barked and barked and barked.

"Shut up, goddamn it!" he shouted, and she paused exactly two barks before resuming.

He swallowed the whiskey, gagged briefly, then washed the glass and went back to bed and stretched out. His head swam. The heat was worse than before. Sweat was running from his eyebrows into the sockets of his eyes. A puddle was gathering in the hollow over his breastbone and another in his bellybutton. He felt squishy between the toes. He was sweating in the crack of his butt.

Tomorrow he definitely would start campaigning for his own electric fan. Meantime he stared at the dark ceiling and tried to imagine he was Garmusk, lying all alone and cool in his quiet tunnel deep underground.

Gradually he began to feel better, as if his blood were chilling inside him, and he fell asleep, not waking until eight-thirty on his damp bed with sunlight that was bright yellow like drawn butter falling across him, and the sounds of Olivia rattling china in the kitchen.

THIS DAY WAS a scorcher too. Farley put in his plea for the fan when Mama was in the middle of her apology for the fight last night, and she said yes without pausing for breath.

He really loved her, sitting there at the breakfast table in a blue cotton wrapper and being nice to him. Her body was smaller than his, and he stared entranced at her heart-shaped smooth face and her huge dark eyes.

No wonder the man from Mars had been attracted, had wanted to talk to her, had sat next to her somewhere, sometime, touching her hand and telling her about his planet, the red cliffs and the red desert, the canals and the blue and purple trees bending over them.

Farley couldn't believe that two such people had done what drawings

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in the boys' toilet at school claimed that married people did to each other. He decided while buttering his toast that Martians just *thought* their wives and girlfriends pregnant. A lot better than the Earth way, in his opinion.

Mama began dressing to go shopping on Canal Street, and a few minutes later Tommy began yelling outside. Hastily, Farley disposed of his breakfast, attired himself in a pair of khaki shorts and his stinkiest old Keds,and shot out the door.

When the boys reached the storm drain, the dog had vanished. Farley was starry-eyed. He had never really believed that anything this wonderful could actually happen.

"*How'd it TASTE*??" he shouted into the darkness, starting a clamor of echoes.

Tommy stared uneasily down the tunnel. Clearly, he was ready to run and wished that Farley wouldn't make so much noise.

"I hope the dog was enough for him," he whispered.

"He'll get hungry again soon. What can we bring him next?"

They decided on some wieners from Tommy's refrigerator, and they fetched them and put them exactly where the dog had been. Then they followed the canal to Lake Pontchartrain and went swimming off the seawall, just removing their Keds and jumping in, and afterward letting the fierce sun dry them.

When they returned in the afternoon to check on the wieners, they were lying where they had been before, only covered with ants.

"Damn," said Farley. "Goddamn. Shit. I can't sit on my ass all day and wait for him to eat."

Tommy was impressed by the cussing and tried gamely to keep up. "Goddamn it to hell," he said. "We wasted those wienies. Ma will want to know what happened to them, too."

"Tell her you had 'em for lunch. Garmusk don't like hot dogs, just cold dogs."

"So what do we get him, Far?"

Farley turned his odd, slanted dark eyes on Tommy and almost told him the idea that had just come to him, but then didn't. Tommy wasn't up to big stuff. Tommy was a drip.

That night Farley's new fan was buzzing and rotating on his dresser. It didn't help as much as he had expected. The passing current of wind

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made him feel chilly and rubbery where it swept over him, but he stayed hot everywhere else. Cissy barked and Farley listened until past midnight, thinking of his idea. Then, prosaically, he fell asleep.

"What we need is rain," Olivia sighed next morning. But the sky was hard and blue, a steel bowl with the sun burning in it like a blinding flash of light on water.

Farley went swimming again with Tommy. The water was thick and green and warm, and unseen fish slid past them with a rasp of scales and nibbled their toes. Swimming felt so good that they stayed too long and came home looking scorched. That night Mama rubbed Farley with Noxema while he writhed because she was hurting him.

"Oh, Honey, I'm sorry. This is a real sunburn."

His face, shoulders, ears, chest, back, and both legs were cooked about to medium rare. There was no possible way to lie in bed without hurting. The fan felt wonderful wherever it touched him, but the burn stung with special vengeance after the wind passed by.

By midnight, Farley was in a mood. At one o'clock he crept to the fence and called softly to Cissy, but she backed off, barking.

Next day his burn kept him home. His well-thumbed library of *Thrilling Wonder Stories* made the morning pass; he sat hunched on a footstool so as not to put his back against anything, turning the dry rustling pages, letting loose the imprisoned robots and rocket ships, the violet beams of the death rays.

At one point Mama hurried through on her way to Canal Street. She was in a great rush, hardly said good-bye, and she forgot her gloves, though she thought that going to Canal Street without gloves was practically the same as going to church without a hat.

The rest of the day passed slowly. Olivia fixed him lunch. In the afternoon he turned on the big Philco radio and listened to soap operas — *Young Widder Brown, Portia Faces Life, One Man's Family* — until four-thirty when his own programs started coming on: *The Lone Ranger, Inner Sanctum Mysteries*.

Mama returned from shopping, and glared at Papa over dinner. The silence was grim, the heat intense. Later on, after a couple of belts of whiskey, she cornered Papa and started screaming at him, paying no attention to Far at all.

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"Your stomach's so flat because you spend your life crawling on it!" she bawled.

When she kept on screaming, Farley went outside and looked up into the hot blue dusk, hearing at the edge of his mind bats squeaking as they hunted. Venus burned steadily in the west; he couldn't find the red eye of Mars, but he knew it was there. He searched for it in the growing dark, while his hands wrestled each other.

Later, Papa came out and joined him. He was holding a drink with chinking ice cubes. Old Jim was getting heavy traffic tonight. After swigging a few times, he said, "You're growing up, Far."

Farley could tell by his voice that he had already had several quick ones. Keeping that iron grip on himself while Mama insulted him must have cost him a lot.

The remark about growing up made Farley uneasy; it often preceded bad news, as in, "You're growing up, and it's time you started doing some work around here."

Papa said, "I really believe you're taller than I am."

They had to stand back to back to measure, but of course it was obvious. Farley had noticed it long ago. Papa was small-boned and walked with his toes turned in and his shoulders hunched forward. Farley's big-boned, spare body was going to grow up until it was even with his big hands and feet.

"In P.E., Mr. Swayze said I'll be six feet tall by the time I'm fourteen," he said proudly. "I can beat up any kid in my class."

Without the slightest warning, Papa said, "I expect you take after your father."

Farley held his breath. Then whispered, "Who is he?"

"I don't know. Somebody your mother knew before she met me. I always...felt like you were my son. You'll understand these things better when you're older."

Tears began to run down Farley's long, pointed nose. Other fluids were clogging it inside.

"Why don't you call me George?" Papa suggested in a strangled voice.

Farley hugged him and called him George, then ran away and hid under a neighbor's azalea bushes. When he came back an hour later, he felt years older.

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* * *

In the morning he woke to a house that was curiously soundless. Farley padded barefoot into the front bedroom and knew at once that Mama hadn't slept at home. Her scent was old, from yesterday.

She was back when he came in for lunch. With his peeling sunburn and a baseball bat in his hand he looked like a Norman Rockwell magazine cover come to life, except that Norman Rockwell boys all had freckles and snub noses.

Mama was looking nice, wearing a summer linen dress, with her brown hair in a long bob lying on her shoulders. Dior's New Look had come in, so her dress covered her knees; Farley had just begun to notice ladies' legs, and also that Mama had good ones, slender but not bony, *shapely* he guessed the word was.

She sat on the sofa in the shadows of the living room with a dreamy expression on her face, and after he leaned the bat against the wall she drew him down beside her and lightly touched his face, careless of getting his sweat on her little white hand.

"Far," she said, "you're growing up."

His stomach turned over twice. Here it comes again, he thought.

"Honey," she went on, "did you ever think it was, well, strange that I'm always going shopping and almost never bring anything home?"

As a matter of fact, he didn't. He had a vague idea that ladies shopped the way that kids played. It was just something they did.

"Uhh."

"Well, Honey, you see — a man's been coming to town to visit me. A man I knew a long time ago."

He stared at her, seeing as if for the first time her red raspberry lipstick, her powdered skin, her big starry eyes, and her glossy hair.

"A long, *long* time ago?" he managed to whisper.

"Yes, Honey. Actually, you'd like him. He looks a lot like you."

Farley exhaled. Now he thought he knew what was coming.

"He's a Cajun," she went on, smiling. "He's the biggest General Motors dealer in the Teche country. His place is called Evangeline Motors. He's a real successful businessman. He lives in a big brick house by the water...."

Abruptly she rose and walked up and down. The smile vanished; she was twisting her hands.

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"He was married when I knew him before, and there wasn't anything we could do about it. I mean, we're both Catholics, and so that was that. Well, I started going with George, and — it's all so complicated. George and I got married and I had you. I've been so mean to him, I just hate myself, and now I'm going to leave him, and you have to try to understand, Honey, even if you don't understand everything. You know George and I haven't been happy together. And it all kind of came to a head, and now — well, this man I told you about, he wants me to go back with him to Opelousas."

"Are we leaving today?" he whispered, trying to picture the man from Cajunland and the stream of water that had turned out to be a Louisiana bayou, not a Martian canal.

"Well, no, Honey," she said, looking away from him; "*we're* not."

He stared at her.

"It's not possible," she said urgently. "Try to understand. Officially, you're George's son. And this man, he has children of his own, and he says they're enough of a handful. Anyway, you love George, and he loves you, and we'll see each other often, I promise you that. I'll be back real, real often. And you can come visit us in Opelousas."

Farley didn't kill her with the baseball bat, even though it seemed to be there just for that purpose. The idea did not even occur to him. Afterward, he wondered why not.

NEXT DAY MAMA left, in floods of tears, with a man who picked her up in a shiny black Lincoln Continental. Farley hid in the azalea bushes and spied on him; the man had a long nose and wore a white Panama hat, and his big dark hands rested on the plastic wheel with its silver horn ring as he waited for her to join him.

She had ordered Olivia to send her clothes, so she just got in and they drove away together, to Cajunland. Or to Mars, what difference did it make?

The heat didn't break. The city had been thirty-two days without rain and every day the newspapers reported the deaths of people, animals, and trees as front-page news. The papers made it sound like the end of the world because, while places like Arizona might go for three years without

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rain, in New Orleans it rained all the time and a month of drought in summertime seemed unendurable.

Since Farley's world had in fact ended, the unnatural seemed natural to him. George tried to comfort him, but that was impossible, because he was only the sitter. Farley wanted his mother, and even though he hated the Cajun from Mars worse than anyone he'd ever known, worse than God who had let this happen, he wanted him, too — the father he had seen once, sitting behind the wheel of the great big Lincoln.

Tommy came and called outside the house, but Farley ignored him and after a while he went away. Farley went alone to the canal and sat in the tunnel and wept. Night after night he could not sleep, even when he drank three or four shots from the new bottle of Beam that George had brought home.

Through the long darknesses his anger grew. Mama wasn't the only one who had rages, though his were silent and therefore worse. Cissy barked and barked, and a little after four o'clock on the fourth morning after Mama left, he decided it was time to feed her to Garmusk.

He got up, made a brief stop in the light of the refrigerator, and went outside. The moon was setting and it was low to the west. An ivy-covered fence, a sweet olive, and a tall myrtle tree cast impenetrable shadows. The yard belonged to another planet, with only the incessant insect chorus and Cissy's barking to speak of Earth.

Farley slid through the shadows over the bristly dry grass, listening to the bugs grow silent and then start up again behind him. He knelt by the fence and held out a bit of cold cooked meat. Cissy came over to investigate, half growling, trying a tentative wag of her tail.

Farley had always had strong hands; he got them from the man from Mars. The chickenwire was a problem, but the hexagonal meshes were wide and his long, strong fingers got hold of Cissy's throat and pulled her against the wire. The sudden scuffle, the gurgling gasp, and the final quiver came and went unheard.

Farley slipped into the neighbors' yard for the body and carried it by the tail to the washroom where Olivia labored during the day. He found a pillowcase in the soiled-clothes basket and put Cissy in.

Hunched over like a troll carrying a sack of ore, he left the yard, his rubber Keds silent on the ground. Ceramic elves stared blindly and

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reflecting globes caught him for an instant in their glimmering orbs. He tried to move in the deep shade of trees and hedges, uneasy at the humpbacked shadow the moon showed him. When he reached the canal the sloping walls lay stark and white as bone. With the marsh so close, millions of insects and frogs chanted deafeningly.

Then in the water, V-shaped wavelets stippled by the moonlight pointed the path of something big swimming just beneath the surface. The ripples ceased; the swimmer knew that Farley was there. He bent and let Cissy's body slip with a soft rustle and splash from the pillowcase into the canal.

For a long moment nothing happened. Then the water surged and something burst upward, scattering spray. Big jaws streamed black and silver and Cissy's dark body was momentarily visible, even her sharp little snout. Something swallowed, gulp, gulp, and sank back into the water.

"Garmusk, was that good?" Farley asked, and a voice that was not his own answered, *Very good.*

Farley sank down, legs shaking. It was like a voice in a dream, yet he wasn't dreaming. One thing he was sure of: it was not a voice he'd ever heard before. It was hoarse and grating and brought with it a long train of echoes as if it spoke from the bottom of a well.

He waited until the lopsided moon set, and in the profound darkness that followed, a thick body heaved itself out of the water, claws scrabbling on the concrete.

Farley almost wept with disappointment. It was only a gator after all — a big one but, after all, just a dumb old lizard that had found a refuge in the tunnel and came out at night to hunt.

The gator raised itself on bent legs and swayed to the mouth of the drain and disappeared very slowly. The gleaming tip of its armored tail was last to go, leaving a long wet mark on the concrete.

"There wasn't no voice," he told himself bitterly. "It was just a 'lucination. I must be going nuts."

Then, deep and hollow, it said *Come again.*

He heard his own whisper. "Are you Garmusk?"

Sometimes.

"What planet you come from?"

I come from Far.

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"That's not a planet. That's my name."

I come from Very Far.

The echoes died away. Farley shouted, but only the bugs and frogs answered. In a daze he set out for home.

BACK IN HIS BED he fell asleep and his rest was deep; Olivia tried to get him up at eight, but he went back to sleep, and at nine, but he slept until ten-oh-five, and woke then only because he was ravenously hungry.

Olivia made him pancakes and smiled to see him gobble them down. He ate like Garmusk, gulping whole mouthfuls at a time.

He was noisy and lively that day. It was Sunday, and George took him for a drive along the beachfront in his old Plymouth and bought him a big shrimp sandwich and a snowball covered with sticky sweet green syrup, and Farley feasted on everything.

That night he heard George say to somebody on the phone, "He's had a rough time, but he's getting over it."

Farley smiled at that. Yet something had changed, or why was he smiling?

Next day he went swimming alone and swam farther out in the lake than he ever had before, as if he were half gator himself. Back home he slammed into the house, thinking of nothing except that he wanted lunch, and there was Mama, waiting for him. The Cajun from Mars had kicked her out.

Farley stared at her, sitting on the couch looking sad, wringing her little hands in a gesture like his own, then raising her face with the shit-eatingest smile he'd ever seen.

Saying, "I'm back, Honey." Then weeping. "I'm so sorry I ever went away. Can you forgive me?"

He said, "Sure, Mama." She hugged and kissed him, and he hugged her back, crying and longing to kiss her, to kill her.

There was a song from the laundry room that day as Olivia celebrated the return of things to near normal. That night George slept on the couch, as if Mama had an exclusive right to their bed whenever she chose to occupy it.

The neighbors were less forgiving; everybody knew the story, having

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received it from their maids who had it from Olivia. That Sunday, on the way to church, Farley saw neighbor ladies cross the street to avoid meeting Mama. The priest talked grimly about the Seventh Commandment, never mentioning what it was, but every eye was on Mama and she snuck out at *Go, the Mass is ended* without waiting for the finale when the choir, all in different keys, burst into *Day of Wrath.*

Farley returned home with various ideas that had come to him during Mass. He called Tommy on the phone for the first time in days. But Tommy said that he couldn't associate with Farley for a while. His mother had put her foot down; she said that Farley was not to blame, but....

But what? Tommy asked. But nothing, his mother said.

All day Farley slid around the house in the brown shadows, listening. He was trying to get straight exactly what had happened in Cajun country. It wasn't easy, because Mama and Papa didn't talk much and when they did, they tended to skip over the good parts. Yet by nightfall he had gathered a small trove of information.

Apparently the man from Mars had hundreds of relatives in Opelousas. His wife had died less than six months before and the relations were all outraged when he picked up somebody else's wife and brought her home with him. He had fifteen kids of all ages, none of whom would have anything to do with Mama. When Mama said she was going to divorce Papa, that only made it worse, because everybody knew that divorce was out for Catholics.

The local priest had preached on the unbreakability of marriage vows in both English and French, to make sure the whole congregation understood what he was saying. So after a week, the man from Mars told Mama it wasn't working, he had a business to keep going and perhaps she had better go home. And here she was, not because she wanted to be but because she wasn't welcome where she'd gone and had no place else to go.

Next day Farley brought a flashlight to the tunnel and walked in deeper than ever before. The circle of light bounced crazily off the walls. Echoes accompanied him. The water with its smell of rotten eggs came trickling out of narrow pipes and deep beds of algae that had formed during wet weather lay brown and tangled, waiting for rain. Spiders had spun webs, mosquitoes whined, and wigglers twitched in the remaining pools.

A long way in, Farley smelled something especially bad and played

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the dancing light across a pile of stinking dung with undigested hair in it. He moved on, and when the tiny star at Elysian Fields had grown to the size of a big shining planet, he reached a catchbasin holding a broad pool of black water.

In the pool something moved, sending ripples against the toes of his Keds. One green eye fleetingly picked up the light, then two.

"It's me," said Farley.

I know.

"Are you inside the gator, Garmusk?"

For the time being.

"Can I go back to Very Far with you? I don't want to go home."

Then step into the pool.

Farley stared, thinking about an article in one of George's encyclopedias. About how an alligator killed: how it seized an arm or a leg, beat the water with its tail until its whole body was revolving, twisted off the limb and swallowed it. When the victim died of pain and shock and blood loss, it left the body to decay and grow soft, then ate the rest a chunk at a time.

Did he have to go through all that to join Garmusk?

He hesitated, touched the pool with one foot and drew it back again. Thinking of the violent death that lay so close made his breath grow short and quick. For a while his whole body vibrated in a tremolo of yearning and repulsion.

Finally, sweating and shaking, he mumbled, "I'm ascared to."

Tell me what you really want.

"I want to die but I'm ascared to."

Then do what I do.

"What do you do, Garmusk?"

When I want to die, I kill instead.

Farley backed up slowly, then turned and walked quickly away. His feet squished in the spongy growths of the tunnel and his own pumping blood sang in his ears.

He didn't get much sleep that night, though Cissy was gone and his sunburn had healed and the fan kept him cool. In the morning he phoned Tommy, hanging up twice when an adult answered. The third time he got him.

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"Far, I ain't supposed — "

"That's okay, I won't tell. Tommy, I seen the gator. He's laying out sleeping in the tunnel where you can see him."

"No shit?"

"Nuh uh. You want to go and see him now, before he moves?"

"Uhhhhh...."

"I'll meet you there in ten minutes. Just don't tell anybody where you're going. They'll get pissed off if you do. They know who you always go there with."

"Ohhhh...kay."

Tommy too was breathing fast: for him, the little drip, disobeying his mother was practically a mortal sin. But also a big thrill.

Far visited the washroom, where Olivia was sitting in an old split-bottom rocker, resting. He told her how happy he was that Mama was back, and that made her smile. He left the washroom with a piece of clothesline in his pocket.

Kneading his big, strong hands together, he set out. When he arrived at the tunnel, he found Tommy waiting for him just inside. Far had thought about bringing a club, but had correctly decided he wouldn't need it. He'd always been strong for his age, very strong.

And it was interesting — later, when the men were searching for Tommy while his parents stood by and watched. Far hadn't been sure he could deceive adults, and at first he felt nervous as the men were walking into the tunnel and calling Tommy's name.

They looked so strange. Why hadn't he ever noticed before how strange Earth people were? They had hair on one side of their heads but not the other. Their hands had only one thumb each. Wouldn't two thumbs opposing three fingers give a firmer grip?

In the tunnel the men were starting echoes as they questioned and answered one another. Far found he could switch them off and on, sometimes hearing words and sometimes only noises like the growling of dogs. Some of the men went all the way to the pool, but Garmusk made the gator stay down out of sight, and after a while they came back out and started to question Far again.

"You say Tommy never went in a long way?"

"No sir, he was ascared to. So was I."

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"You all never seen nobody hanging around here — like a strange man or anything?"

"No sir, there never was nobody around here. That's why we used to come down here to play. I tell you — "

"Yes, son?"

"I just don't think he'd come down here all by himself. He'd a been 'fraid to. I bet he went swimming off the seawall by the lake. He wasn't ascared out there, because there was always people around."

Tommy's mother cried out then and said, If only she hadn't forbidden him to play with Far, Far was such a big strong boy and a good swimmer, Tommy would have been safe with him along. Tommy's father put his arms around her, and the men moved on to where the police were already dragging the lake.

Far went home. Mama was waiting for him and she hugged him while he kneaded his big hands, right with left, left with right. She stroked his back and wept and said it might have been him instead of Tommy.

"You're never going down there again, Far. Never, never."

He waited until she was finished squalling and turned away from her. When she left the room he stood there with his fists still closed and looked at her back, her brown bob, her shapely legs.

That night he slept with tumultuous dreams, and woke early to find immense white clouds piling in from the Gulf, towering like castles into the deep blue sky.

When he set out for the canal, the sky was already turning the color of a gunbarrel. Big drops of rain began to pelt down, hissing on the hot concrete slopes. He took shelter inside the drain and watched it fall in sheets, roaring as if to make up for the whole arid month of June in a single day.

Great waves of coolness set him shivering, for he was shirtless as usual and wearing only his shorts and Keds. He sat down, hugging his goosepimples, and idly, like a shedding snake, began peeling off strips of wrinkled dead white skin. Some of the strips were a foot long and had a curious scaly pattern that fascinated him. He began to eat them and they dissolved on his tongue, as tasteless as communion wafers.

Then his butt felt wet, and he looked down and saw that the stream in the center of the tunnel was running deeper and faster. He stood up and

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stepped out into the rain and let its cold fury scour him until his hair hung streaming over his eyes like black water weed. He threw his head back and opened his mouth and cold rain filled it in an instant and he gulped it down.

The squall passed and the rain slackened. The stream in the tunnel was running strong and deep, and he heard the gator moving. Claws and scales rasping against concrete, the sound coming and going and vanishing again in the rush of water. Far waded into the waterfall pouring whitely from the tunnel mouth and fought his way up the slope.

The water foamed and swirled around his legs, pushing, demanding, urging him to go back before it was too late. But he was no longer afraid of death, or anything else. He braced himself against the tunnel wall and waited. The gator approached, half swimming, half walking on the bottom of the tunnel. The tip of its snout rose from the water, then its eyes, then its armored back like a moving island. A lightning flash lit up the tunnel, and for an instant its bulging yellow eyes flickered green and the cat pupils narrowed to slits.

Then it was beside him, one eye watching him, a long claw raking his shinbones, and it slipped past, tipping over the edge into the waterfall and sliding down the concrete slope into the deep, swift-running canal. Slowly its great armored tail beat once, twice, in S-shaped sweeps and it moved with the rising current toward Lake Pontchartrain and the marshlands beyond that were its real home.

A desperate fear struck Farley. He drew a gasping breath and shouted, "Wait! Don't go!"

You didn't join me, said his father's voice behind him. *So I'm joining you.*

Farley spun around and stared. The hoarse voice echoed and echoed and echoed again, as if the tunnel were millions of miles long, and the light at the far end a real star.

Then the infinitely distant gleam was approaching, growing bigger and brighter until it was the size of a planet, the size of a moon. It cast shadows, at first dim, then sharp-edged. It ceased to be a flat disc, it swelled into a silver globe and Farley, staring into it, saw — curiously deformed — his own face.

He stopped breathing for a moment, felt as if he were suffocating, took

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in a shuddering breath, and sucked in the globe like a shining bubble. It burst inside his head like a jolt of liquor, releasing a surge of power. He felt Garmusk moving through him, exploring him as a buyer explores a new house.

Now we're together, the rough voice said, *we'll do anything we want.*

"Anything?"

Anything at all. When you belong nowhere and to nobody, the sky's the limit.

"Bet your goddamn ass," Farley said aloud, feeling in every fiber of his long, strong muscles the monstrous power of alienage.

Back at home, he was standing in the bathroom drying himself when Mama opened the door without knocking. That enraged him and something in his eyes made her shrink back.

"Oh, Honey," she said, "you don't hate me, do you? I don't think I could stand that."

She came in and put her arms around him and stroked his bare back, passing her smooth fingers over the scaly ridges left by the burn. She'd been with the bottle again, he could smell it.

"You're so much like him," she whispered. "So *much* like him. Every time I look at you I see him."

He dropped the wet towel and closed his big hands over the back of her neck and stood there for an instant, moving his fingers for a more balanced grip, smiling a little at the thought of what would happen next.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

NEXT MONTH WE'LL accompany a tall man with gray eyes to America's Southwest in search of...well, it would give away too much to say what he seeks. But you'll enjoy accompanying him on his search in "Litany" by Rand B. Lee.

Other stories coming soon include new science fiction novellas by Michael Blumlein and Charles Coleman Finlay, new fantasy stories by Marc Laidlaw and P. E. Cunningham, and the return of Clem Crowder, ayuh. Go to *www.fandsf.com* or use the card in this issue to subscribe now so you won't miss a thing!

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KATHI MAIO

HERETICAL DUSTUP... OR SIMPLE DUD?

I ENJOY A good conspiracy theory as much as the next person. So, as the release date for the New Line production of the first of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy, *The Golden Compass* (originally, *Northern Lights*), approached, I relished the spectacle of paranoid rants coming from all sides. The loudest voices came from certain Catholic and other Christian conservative groups that view Pullman's works and the associated film as a "diabolical revolt against God, bishops, and priests" designed to "bring millions of children into contact with the demonic." (Harry Potter fans will recognize the tenor of such denunciations.)

Yet, to be fair to the fundamentalist Catholic critics, just because they are paranoid, doesn't mean that the mild-mannered, Oxford-educated Pullman isn't out to get them. The *His Dark Materials* trilogy is, after all, a kind of inverted *Paradise Lost*, in which a young Eve called Lyra — an amazon warrior defending free will against authority — comes of age, crosses into alternate worlds, learns the truth about a doddering fraudulent god, gains transcendent sensual knowledge in a garden with her own version of Adam, and doesn't feel shame about a single thing.

Although he is obviously fascinated with the concept of soul/spirit and the essence of human nature, Mr. Pullman is certainly no admirer of dogmatic, monotheistic, authoritarian religion. And he makes this quite clear from the first chapter of *The Golden Compass* on.

Yet even after word got out that writer-director Chris Weitz *(About a Boy)* had expunged almost all clear religion references from

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his film, the condemnations of the movie didn't stop. The conspiracy theorists simply accused the film of being a big dangerous come-on — that is, "bait for the books."

Weitz and his studio were probably not thrilled by being labeled the cinematic equivalent of a gateway drug, but I doubt they were surprised by the accusation, either. Philip Pullman's own provocative statements in interviews — like when he pooh-poohed any nervousness about the Rowling/Potter series by claiming that his books are much more subversive since they are "about killing God" — helped maintain the status of *The Golden Compass* as a religio-political hot potato over these several years from pre-production to release.

Avid fantasy fans have been known to express strong opinions about movies based on deeply loved books, too. Therefore, Pullman aficionados also began to express their derision over the New Line project early on; especially after a Chris Weitz interview for a Pullman fan site *(www.bridgetothestars.net)* in 2004, when the filmmaker freely admitted that he would be required, largely because of corporate/economic considerations, to make "some modification of terms," removing the word church and expressing Pullman's views "in more subtle guises."

When Mr. Weitz first saw the growing firestorm about *The Golden Compass* coming at him from all directions, he made a rational move — he cut and ran. Whether it was newfound courage or a fistful of dollars that brought Chris Weitz — as first and third director of *The Golden Compass* — back to the project, I do not know. But I do feel for his no-win situation.

In the end, despite the numerous compromises, I think Chris Weitz really tried to honor the essence of his movie's original source material. And, all in all, he made an engrossing, well-constructed, and visually handsome film out of Mr. Pullman's long and complex novel.

Chris Weitz opens his film, as Mr. Pullman does his novel, in an alternate version of Oxford, England. Here a young orphan girl named Lyra (Dakota Blue Richards) hides in a wardrobe — take that, C. S. Lewis! — and quickly becomes involved in some very deadly adult political games. The focus of the research of her rather intense uncle, Lord Asriel (Daniel Craig), seems to create worries among the scholars of Jordan College, and poisonous consternation among the powers that be, a group known as the Magisterium.

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His research is to be conducted in the polar north, where a puzzling form of particulate matter, referred to as Dust, seems to flow through humans and offer a glimpse of possible other worlds. The Magisterium wishes to suppress such inquiries as heresy (religious reference alert!), while a mysterious beauty named Mrs. Coulter (Nicole Kidman) seems to have her own interest in the Arctic region.

Before long, Lyra's childhood chum, Roger (Ben Walker), has been abducted by a nefarious group called the Gobblers, and Lyra, herself a runaway, sets out to assist in a rescue armed with the title magical truth compass, called an alethiometer, and comforted by the companionship of her dæmon, a sometime cat, sometime moth, sometime ermine named Pantalaimon (voiced by Freddie Highmore).

Not wanting to get caught in the voiceover or fake dialogue overexposition trap, dæmons are one of the many fantastical story elements that the filmmaker chooses not to explain completely. So much the better to allow the viewers to form their own opinion about what these animal familiars, common to all humans, represent. A physical manifestation of soul or id? Decide for yourself. Or simply let yourself be filled with envy that any human, in any universe, could be lucky enough to have a lifelong companion that is equal parts instigator and conscience, as well as a physical and emotional comforter par excellence.

Since many of the dæmons, like Lord Asriel's snow leopard, Stelmaria (voiced by Kristin Scott Thomas), are exotic animals, it goes without saying that these creature comforts are achieved through CGI. And one of the major triumphs of *The Golden Compass* is how well the film integrates the special effects of elaborate (almost recognizable) locales, talking animals, and fantastical contraptions with real world situations and effective live action performances.

One of the movie's best performances is thanks in part to the formidable voicework of Ian McKellen, but even more to the artist-technicians working under visual effects supervisor Michael Fink. The character in question is a *panserbjørne*, or armored polar bear, named Iorek Byrnison. As a disgraced noble warrior, redeemed by his championship of Lyra, Iorek is the character who experiences the greatest emotional arc in the movie, as well as the most action. And if you can remember that this creature is nothing more than bytes and pixels while you watch him on screen, you are doing better than I.

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I found the character of Iorek to be utterly believable; at times ferocious and frightening, and at other times tragic or tender.

So the artificial acting is strong in *The Golden Compass*. But what of the human performances? Those looking for star turns by some of the recognizable names in the cast will likely be disappointed. Daniel Craig is little more than a cameo. And the beauteous Eva Green, as witch clan queen Serafina Pekkala, has only a handful of lines. Although the acting is solid, from Sam Elliott as the cowpoke of the sky Lee Scoresby to Tom Courtenay as Farder Coram, an elder of the gyptians (water gypsies) that are staunch — if underdeveloped — allies of Lyra, most of the adult actors have precious little to do in the film.

Only Nicole Kidman, who does ice princess better than just about anyone, gets a significant amount of screen time. And makes very good use of it! Her Mrs. Coulter is extremely elegant, and equally evil. You have no trouble believing that she is the mastermind behind the General Oblation Board, or "Gobblers," the Magisterium sub-committee stealing poor children for a dastardly polar experiment called intercision.

But the key performance in the film doesn't come from a CGI or a human adult, it comes from a little girl. Her name is Dakota Blue Richards, and she makes her feature film acting debut in *The Golden Compass*. And a fierce, affecting debut it is, too.

I have heard some complaints about the performance — viewers (who were obviously not Pullman readers) who complained that the actor playing Lyra was just too bratty and unkempt. Proof, I'd say, that the portrayal is spot on. The character of Lyra was never designed to be a sweet, adorable little miss. Lyra, watched over and educated by servants and scholars at Jordan College, but raised by no one in particular, is self-made and semi-feral. Only someone as fearless and rebellious as this girl could bring down the evil of authority — a concept she respects not in the least.

Lyra is destined to be the undoing of civilization and the salvation of humanity. It is a daunting fate, and I admire the fact that Chris Weitz didn't try to cutesy-fy this young warrior maiden or mitigate the harshness of her epic journey.

However, there is an equally harsh reality in Hollywood. And that is that if an expensive movie doesn't rake in the dough, there will be no sequels — no matter whether the story is designed as a cycle of three or not. And *The*

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Golden Compass didn't even come close to making back its sizable budget in U.S. theaters.

I can't say that I was surprised by that sad fact, either.

Although I am sure that the Christian fundamentalist critics would like to take credit for the film never finding a large U.S. audience, I seriously doubt that such credit is due them. Yes, the negative press was probably a factor, but less of an issue than the fact that the movie failed to meet a few parental criteria for exemplary kiddie entertainment, no matter what the religious persuasion, or lack thereof. First of all, the story is neither simple nor straightforward. And it is filled with unfamiliar beings, practices, and arcane terminology. Weitz tried to keep as many of the ideas, images, and metaphysical concepts of Philip Pullman's original story in the film as possible. As a result, a viewer — especially a young one — unfamiliar with the books, will likely fall behind quickly and never catch the thread of the narrative again.

And then there is the overall tone of the film. Outside of the opening scene of childish mock warfare, there is no sense of merriment or fun in this movie. Wonder, yes. Merriment, no. And the audience must savor those opening moments of golden Oxford sunshine, for they will see little more brightness in the rest of the film. Scene after scene is full of darkness, foreboding, and implied or actual violence. Want to see a light-filled interior? I hope you don't mind that it turns out to be in a concentration camp cafeteria for kidnapped children who are scheduled for a particularly hideous form of torture.

Most American parents and children want bright and cheerful stories. A little bit of scary is okay, but not too much. A sad touch is acceptable, as long as the overall message is upbeat. And they want easy heroics, uncomplicated villainy, and plenty of sunshine. An unequivocally happy ending is also, of course, de rigueur.

Animated stories like the 2006 holiday hit *Happy Feet* are the best bet. But slightly more serious adventure fantasies, like 2005's Christmas smash, *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, can also easily charm an audience.

Narnia, of course, had no trouble winning the Christian box-office, since the lion Aslan was (even in the movie) a rather obvious Christ figure who willingly died for the sins of humanity, but arose again from the dead. Still, the appeal of the movie had less to do

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with theology than it did with the sweetness of young Lucy, the cuteness of the creatures like the fauns, and the regal pageantry that played out on Narnia's green and golden pastures. The wholesome Pevensie siblings end up triumphing over evil and still get "home" safe and sound — but not before being crowned royalty *and* meeting Santa Claus! Now that's a rip-roaring tale for the entire family.

The Golden Compass, book and movie, makes no such attempt to leave their audiences walking on sunshine in the final chapter or scene. Philip Pullman actually closes his book with the sacrificial slaughter of a child as a means of opening up a portal to another world for a mad scientist (who just happens to be the father of young Lyra). Harrowing and very un-Hollywood stuff, that! Chris Weitz softens Pullman's ending by closing his film at a slightly earlier point in the plot. He leaves his audience neither traumatized nor triumphant — just faintly apprehensive and primed for the continuation of the saga in upcoming sequels; sequels that may never come precisely because the movie refuses to package itself as predictably jolly family fare.

The fate of the cinematic continuation of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy is yet to be determined. I am hoping that the trilogy completes itself. And if Mr. Weitz chooses not to run this particularly nasty gauntlet of public and critical opinion again, I hope that the next helmer manages to be as trustworthy a guardian of the original story.

Taking the word "church" out of *The Golden Compass* compromised very little. I had no trouble detecting the religious overtones in the fascist state being depicted. (Heck, one of the murderous state goons was even named Fra Pavel!) And if there was ever a time to contemplate the negative ramifications of the theocratic state, now would be that time.

I will be sorry if *The Subtle Knife*, the second novel in the series, is never made into a movie. And I will be equally sorry if *The Golden Compass* never finds the wide audience — on DVD and cable and download — that it deserves. This is admittedly not a fun frolic of a warm and fuzzy fairy tale. (Those who require their movies to be thus flocked to America's cineplexes and made a smash hit out of *Enchanted* this past holiday season.)

Enchanting in its own way, *The Golden Compass* is a cold, dark fable. Adults plot evil in support of

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their own power lust. Children and the underclass suffer. People die and their dæmons evaporate in a burst of golden dust. It's tough stuff for the little tykes to watch, perhaps — but I think they can take it. They live in this world with the rest of us, after all.

For this film also features one of the most valiant child heroines I have seen in many a day. And although she doesn't experience a sunny and tidy happy ending, she does survive, even prevail, to fight authority another day.

That's the kind of fable even a world-weary adult can find inspirational.

"It isn't that bad. I feel like I used to after watching TV all day."

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In the January 2008 issue of Locus *magazine, M. Rickert remarked that "I've noticed that I'm getting a lot from the news, not so much [story] ideas as feelings. It's almost like I can feel the characters and their emotions." Here she gives us a story that surely originated in just such a manner, a timely speculation about the near future.*

Traitor

By M. Rickert

ALIKA WITH HER BRAIDS OF bells comes walking down the street, chewing bubble gum and singing, "Who I am I'll always be, God bless you and God bless me, America, America, the land of the free!"

Rover says, "What's that song you're singing, Alika? That ain't no song."

Alika, only nine, ignores him the same way she's seen her mama ignore the comments of men when she walks with her to the bus stop or the Quickmart.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" Rover says.

But Alika just walks on by and Rover just watches her pass. The girl is only nine and he is nearly twelve. He shakes his head and looks down the street in the other direction. Besides which, she is crazy. Shit, he spits at the sidewalk. Damn! He can't help it. He turns and watches her walking away, her braids jangling.

"America! America! Oh, I love America! My beautiful country, my own wonderful land, my homeland, America, loves me."

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Alika's mom watches her and shakes her head. She drags her cigarette. Smoke swirls from her nostrils and mouth. Her fingers, with the long green painted nails, tremble.

Alika sees her sitting there on the stoop. "Hi, Mama!" she calls. The bells ring as she comes running down the walk. Running right toward her mama who sits there with smoke coming out of her ears and nose and mouth.

"Hey, baby," Alika's mother says. "Where you been?"

Alika stops in mid-running-step. Bells go brrring, brrring. She looks at her mama. Her mama looks at her. A truck passes. Fans and air-conditioners hum. Alika watches a bird fly into the branches of a tree, disappear into the green.

"Alika? Where you been honey?"

Alika shrugs. The bells jingle softly.

"Come here, child."

Alika walks over to her mama.

"Sit down." Her mama pats the step, right beside her.

Alika's butt touches her mother's hip. Alika's mother smells like cigarettes and orchid shampoo. She brings a trembling hand to her lips. Drags on the cigarette, turns to face Alika. Alika thinks she is the luckiest girl in America to have a mama so beautiful.

"You don't remember none of it?" she says.

Alika shakes her head. It always happens like this. Her mother puts an arm around her, pulls her tight. Alika's bells ring with a burst. "Good," her mama says. "Well, all right then. Good."

They sit there until their butts get sore and then they go inside. Alika blinks against the dark and she hums as she runs up the stairs. Her mother follows behind, so slow that Alika has to wait for her at the door. While she waits, Alika hops from one foot to another. The bells make a quick ring, but Alika's mother says, "Shush, Alika, what did I tell you about making noise out here?"

Alika stands still while her mother unlocks the door. When she opens it, fans whirl the heat at them. Alika's mom says, "Shit." She closes the door. Locks it. Chains it. Alika says, "Won't do much good."

Alika's mother turns fast. "What?" she says with a sharp mean voice.

Alika shrugs. Brrring. She spins away from her mother, singing, "Oh,

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America, my lovely home, America for me. America! America! The bloody and the free!"

"Alika!" her mother says.

Alika stops in mid-spin. Bells go brrring brring ring tingle tap. She keeps her arms spread out and her feet apart, her eyes focused on the light switch on the wall.

"I'm going into the room," Alika's mother says.

Alika knows what that means.

"I'll be out in a couple of hours. Your dinner is in the refrigerator. Nuke it for three minutes. And be careful when you take off the plastic wrap. Do you hear me Alika?"

Nod. (Brrring.)

"You're a good girl, Alika. Don't turn the TV too loud. Maybe we'll go get ice cream."

Alika's mother goes into the room. Alika resumes spinning.

THE ROOM IS RED, the color of resistance. It is stifling hot with all the shades pulled down. She's considered an air-conditioner but it seems selfish when the money could be better spent elsewhere. The resistance isn't about her being comfortable. She takes off her clothes and drops them to the floor. She walks across the room and flips on the radio. It cackles and whines as she flips through the noise. Damn station is always moving. It's never where it was the day before. Finally she finds it. Music comes into the room and fills it up. She is filled with music and red. She walks over to stare at the wall of the dead. She looks at each photograph and says, "I remember." They smile back at her in shades of black, white, and gray. Sometimes she is tempted to hurry through this part or just say a general "I remember" once to the entire wall. But she knows it isn't her thinking this. Resistance begins in the mind. I remember. She looks at each face. She remembers. It is never easy.

When that's finished she walks to the worktable. She sits down on the towel, folded across the chair. She looks at the small flag pasted on the wall there. The blue square filled with stars, the forbidden stripes of red and white. She nods. I remember. Then she flicks on the light and bends over her work.

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Alika spins six more times until she is so dizzy, she spins to the chair and plops down. When things fall back in order she looks at the closed door behind which her mother works. Red, Alika thinks and then quickly shakes her belled braids to try not to think it again. Alika's mother doesn't know. Alika has been in the room. She's seen everything.

Hours later, after Alika has eaten the meatloaf and mashed potatoes and several peas; after the plate has been washed and dried and her milk poured down the drain, while she sits in the dim heat watching her favorite TV show, "This Is the Hour," her mother comes out of the room, that strange expression on her face, her skin glossy with sweat, and says, "Hey honey, wanna go for ice cream?"

Alika looks at her and thinks, Traitor. She nods her head. Vigorously. The bells ring but the word stays in her mind.

It's a hot evening, so everybody is out. "Hi, Alika!" they say. "Hi, Pauline." Alika and her mother smile and wave, walking down the street. When somebody whistles they both pretend they don't hear and when they pass J.J. who sits on his stoop braiding his own baby girl's hair and he says, "My, my, my," they just ignore him too. Finally they get to the Quickmart.

"What flavors you got today?" says Alika's mother. Sometimes, when Mariel is working, they stand around and talk but this is some new girl they've never seen before. She says, "Today's flavors are vanilla, chocolate, and ice cream."

Alika's mother says, "Oh."

Alika says, "What's she mean ice cream? Of course the ice cream is flavored ice cream."

But Alika's mother doesn't pay much attention to her. She looks right at the girl and says, "So soon?" The girl says, "She's already nine. She's going to start remembering." Then she looks at Alika and says, "What flavor you want?"

Alika says, "You said vanilla, chocolate, and ice cream."

The girl smiles. Her teeth are extraordinarily white. Alika stares at them. "Did I say that?" the girl says. "I don't know what I was thinking. Flavors today are Vanilla, Chocolate, and Hamburger."

"Hamburger?" Alika looks at her mother. This girl is nuts. But her mother is standing there just staring into space with this weird look on her face. "I'll have chocolate," Alika says. "I always take chocolate."

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The girl nods. "Those sure are pretty braids," she says as she scoops chocolate ice cream into a cone.

"I only get one scoop," says Alika.

"Well, today we're giving you three," says the girl with the brilliant white teeth.

Alika glances at her mother.

"Don't worry," the tooth girl says, "she already said it would be all right."

Alika doesn't remember that. She says, "I don't remember — "

But her mother interrupts her in that mean voice. "Oh Alika, you never remember anything. Take the ice cream. Just take it."

Alika looks at the girl. "That's not true," she says. "I remember some things."

The girl's eyes go wide.

Alika's mother grabs her by the wrist and pulls her, walking briskly out the door, Alika's bells ringing. "Mama," she says, "you forgot to pay that girl."

"It doesn't matter," Alika's mama says. "She's a friend of mine."

Alika turns but the girl no longer stands behind the counter. Some little kids run in and she can hear them shouting "Hey, anyone here?" Alika's mother lets go of her wrist but continues to walk briskly. Alika's bells ring. Her mama says, "You're more like me than anyone else."

Alika looks up at her beautiful mama and smiles.

But Alika's mama doesn't look at her. She stares straight ahead. She walks fast. Alika has to take little running steps to keep up. She can't hardly eat her ice cream. It drips over her fingers and wrist and down her arm. Alika licks her arm. "Mama," she says. Her mama doesn't pay her any mind. She just keeps walking, her legs like scissors, pwish pwish pwish. Her face like rock. Alika thinks, scissors, paper, rock. Her mama is scissors and rock. That makes Alika paper. "Hey Mama," Alika says, "I'm paper." But her mother just keeps walking, pwish pwish pwish. Alika turns her wrist to lick her arm. The top two ice cream scoops fall to the sidewalk. "Shit," she says.

"What did you say?" the scissors stops and turns her rock face on Alika. "What did I just hear you say?"

"I'm sorry, Mama."

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"You're sorry?" The rock stands there. Waiting for an answer.

"Yes, Mama," Alika says in a tiny, papery voice.

The rock grabs Alika by the wrist, the one that is not dripping and sticky.

"Pauline, that girl of yours giving you trouble?"

The rock turns to face the voice but does not let go of Alika's wrist. "This little thing? She couldn't give trouble to a fly."

The ice cream in Alika's other hand drips down her arm, the cone collapsing. Alika doesn't know what to do so she drops it to the sidewalk.

The rock squeezes her wrist, "What did you do that for?"

"Ow, Mama," Alika says, "you're hurting me." Her bells clack against each other.

"Stop it, Alika," says the rock. "I mean it now. Stop your twisting around this instant."

Alika stops.

The rock bends down, face close to Alika's. "I don't want you arguing or crying about some stupid ice cream cone. Do you hear me?"

Alika can see that the rock is crying. She nods. Brrring. Brrring.

The rock lets go of Alika's wrist. Alika has to run to keep up, her bells ringing. "Hey, Pauline. Hey, Alika." Scissors, rock, and paper. Paper covers rock. Scissors get old and rusty. Alika spreads her arms wide. She runs right past her mama. "Alika! Alika!" But she doesn't stop. She is a paper airplane now, or a paper bird. She can't stop. "Alika! Alika!" Her bells ring. "Alika!"

Her mother doesn't even scold her when she finds her waiting at the top of the stairs. She just says, "Time for bed now."

While Alika gets ready for bed Pauline goes into the red room. She takes the photographs down from the wall of the dead. She doesn't think about it. She just does it. She goes to the worktable, stares at it for a while, and sighs. She'll have to stay up late to finish. What's she been doing anyway? With her time?

"Mama? I'm ready for my story."

She sets the stack of the dead on the worktable.

"Mama?"

"I'm coming!" she hollers. She doesn't even bother turning off the

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light. She'll be back in here soon enough, up half the night, getting everything ready.

WHAT I'M GOING TO TELL YOU about tonight is ice. From before. When there were winters and all that. When I was a little girl I snuck in my daddy's truck one night. He and my brother, Jagger, were going ice fishing the next morning. They said girls couldn't come along. So I decided to just sneak a ride. I lay there in the back of that truck all night. Let me tell you, it was cold. I had nothing but my clothes and a tarp to keep me warm. I know, you don't understand about cold. It was like being in the refrigerator, I guess. The freezer part, you know, 'cause that's where it's cold enough for ice. I lay there and looked at the stars. I tried to imagine a time like the one we live in right now. I tried to imagine being warm all over. I closed my eyes and pretended the sun was shining on my face. I guess it worked 'cause after a while I fell asleep.

I woke up when Daddy and Jagger came out the door and walked over to the truck. I could hear their footsteps coming across the snow. It sounded like when you eat your cereal. They put the cooler in the back but they didn't see me hid under the tarp. They didn't discover me until we got to the lake. My daddy was mad, let me tell you. Jagger was too. But what were they going to do? Turn around? Daddy called my mama and told her what I did. I could hear her laughing. Jagger could hear her too. We stood there by the side of the frozen lake and stared at each other. You never had a brother. You don't know what it's like. Daddy hung up the phone, put it in his pocket, and said, "Your mama is very disappointed in you." Then he told me all the rules. How I had to be quiet and stay out of the way. He gave me two big nails to carry in my pocket. They were supposed to help me grab hold of the ice if I fell in.

The lake was all frozen and pearly white at the edges. You could see the lights shining in half a dozen little shanties. Mama had made red and white curtains for ours.

Walking across that ice, the sky lit with stars, the faint glow of lights and murmur of voices coming from the shanties, I felt like I was in a beautiful world. Even the cold felt good out there. It filled my lungs. I pictured them, red and shaped like a broken heart.

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When we get into our shanty, my dad lifts the wooden lid off the floor and Jagger starts chipping through the ice there, which was not so thick, my daddy said, since they'd been coming regularly. And then they sat on the benches and my dad popped open a beer. Jagger drank a hot chocolate out of the thermos my mama had prepared for him. He didn't offer to share and I didn't ask. It smelled bad in there, a combination of chocolate, beer, wet wool, and fish. So I asked my dad if it was all right that I went outside. He said just don't bother the other folk and don't wander too far from the ice shanties.

I walked across the ice, listening to the sound of my footsteps, the faint murmur of voices. The cold stopped hurting. I looked at all the trees surrounding the lake, a lot of pine, but also some bare oak and birch. I looked up at the stars and thought how they were like fish in the frozen sky.

Anyhow, that's how I came to be practically across the lake when I heard the first shouts, and the next thing I know, ice shanties are tilting and everything is sinking. I hear this loud noise, and I look down. Right under me there is a crack, come all the way from where the ice shanties are sinking, to under my feet.

I finger the nails in my pocket though I am immediately doubtful that they will do me much good. At the same time, I start to step forward, because, even though I'm just a kid, I want to help. But when I lean forward the crack gets deeper. When I lean back to my original position the ice cracks again. Men are shouting and I even hear my daddy, calling Jagger's name. But there are only islands of ice between me and the drowning men.

I am maybe a half-mile away from the opposite shore. The ice in that direction is fissured and cracked but appears to be basically intact, though even as I assess it, more fissures appear. What I have to do is walk away from my father and brother and all the drowning men. I was not stupid. I knew that it wouldn't take long for them to die, that it would take longer for me to walk across the ice. If I made it across. I would say that right at that moment, when I turned away from the men whose shouts were already growing weak, something inside of me turned into ice. It had to, don't you see? I decided to save the only person I could save, myself. I want you to understand, I never blamed myself for this decision. I don't regret it either.

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So, I clutch the nails in my fist and step forward. The ice cracks into a radiated circle like those drawings you used to make of the sun. What else can I do? I lift my foot to take another step. Right then a crow screams. I look up. It's as though that bird is shouting at me to stop. I bring my foot back. Slowly. When I set it down again, I can hear my breath let out. That's when I notice that there is no sound. Just my breath. There is no more shouting. I picture them under the ice, frozen. I picture their faces and the nails falling from ice fingers. It almost makes me want to give up. But instead I take a careful step and just when I feel that ice under me, I exhale, slowly. I want you to understand. I know now and I knew then, that ice doesn't breathe. But it was like I was breathing with the ice. I took the next step fast, and right beneath me the fissure separated. I had to forget about the dead, I had to stop my heart from beating so hard. I had to make myself still. Then, carefully, I lifted my leg. Slowly. Breathing like ice. I breathed like ice, even when I started sweating, and I kept breathing like ice, even when the tears came to my eyes. I did this until I got to the shore on the other side. Only then did I turn around and start bawling. There's a time for emotions, right?

Trucks and cars were parked all along the opposite shore. I could see our red Ford. But no one was standing there. Mist was rising off the lake. I ran and walked halfway back before Mrs. Fando found me. She was driving out to scold her husband because he was late for work.

Folks treated me different after that. Everyone did. Everyone treated me the way Jagger used to, like I was too ugly to be alive or like I was some kind of a traitor. Even my own mother. Like I broke that ice under all those men and boys and murdered them myself. I tried to describe to them what happened and how I made it out by learning to breathe like ice but no one took me seriously. For a long time.

Then, when I was seventeen, this stranger came to town. People noticed her because she dressed so well, drove a nice car and was asking about me. She had this old torn newspaper article from way back and she said, "Is this you who survived that ice breakup?" I said yes it was. I thought she was maybe someone's girlfriend or grown daughter coming to tell me she wished I had died and her man had lived. Folks said stuff like that. But what she said was, "I think you need to come with us." She was a recruiter. For the new army. You heard about that, I'm sure.

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Yep. That's what I want you to know about me, little girl. I never told you this before. I want you to understand what I do isn't for death. All those years ago I chose life, and I've been choosing it ever since. I have some special skills is all. I can walk like water, for instance; breathe like ice. I can build things. I have seen many people die and I still choose to stay alive. Those are qualities they look for in soldiers.

What I want you to understand is that all the time since then, I think I turned partly into ice. Until you came along. You came along and thawed me out, I guess. It's like that feeling I had, when I was walking out on the ice and I thought the world was a beautiful place. I have that feeling again with you. I couldn't love you more if you were my natural born daughter. Do you understand what I'm trying to say? I bet none of this makes any sense to you at all.

Pauline leans down and kisses Alika's forehead. Alika rolls over, her bells go brrring. "Damn bells," says Pauline. She shuts off the light. Walks out of the room.

Alika opens her eyes. She sits up. Slowly. Alika knows how to move so carefully that the bells don't ring. Alika grabs the end of one of the braids. Slowly, she twists the bell off. It doesn't make a sound. What do they think? She's stupid or something?

She has to keep herself awake for a long time. Her mama is in the forbidden room almost all night long. She keeps herself from falling asleep by remembering the pictures she saw on that wall. All those photographs of smiling children wearing backpacks. My sisters, Alika thinks.

It is already light out when she hears the forbidden door open and shut, her mother walking across the apartment to her own bedroom. When Alika leaves her room, she doesn't make a sound. The bells remain on her pillow. The first thing she notices is the smell of paint. The forbidden room is no longer red. It is white. All the pictures are gone. The worktable is folded up against the wall, beside the bookshelf. Alika can just barely see where the flag had been pasted. The paint there is a little rougher. But the flag is gone. Next to the door is her mama's suitcase, and a backpack and a camera. Alika opens up the backpack. Very carefully. She sighs at the wires. "Be one with the backpack," she says to herself. "Breathe like ice," she rolls her eyes.

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By the time she leaves the room, it is bright out. She just gets the last bell in her hair when her mama comes in and says, "Get up now honey. Today is going to be a special day. I got you a new backpack."

Alika gets up. Her bells go brrring. She goes to the bathroom. She can just see the top of her eyes in the mirror over the sink. She changes into her yellow butterfly top and her white shorts. It's already hot. She eats a big bowl of cereal, sitting alone at the kitchen table. Her bells make little bursts of sound that accompany her chewing, which is like the sound of footsteps walking across snow her mama said. Sun pours through the white curtain on the window over the sink. After she brushes her teeth she stands in the kitchen and sings, "America, America, how I love you true. America, America the white stars and the blue."

"Okay, child. Come here now." Alika's mama stands in the forbidden room. The door is wide open. "Look what I have for you. A new backpack!"

Alika spins. Her bells go brrring, brrring, brrring.

"Alika! Alika!" Her mama says, "Stop spinning now."

Alika stops spinning.

"Let me put this on you."

Alika looks up at her mama, the most beautiful mother in the world. "There's something you should know about me," Alika says.

Alika's mama sighs. She keeps the backpack held out in front of her. "What is it, Alika?"

"I'm not stupid."

Alika's mama nods. "Of course you're not," she says. "You're my little girl, aren't you? Now come here and put this thing on."

After Alika's mama buckles the backpack on her, she locks it with a little key and puts the key into her own pocket.

"Don't I need that?" Alika says.

"No, you don't," her mama says. "Today we're doing things a little different. You get to keep this backpack. Not like the others that you had to drop off somewhere. This one is for you to keep. Your teacher will unlock it when you get to school. I gave her the extra key, okay? Now come over here. I want to take your picture."

Alika follows the map her mother drew. "You have to take a different way to school today," she said. Her hands were shaking when she drew it.

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Alika follows the wavy lines, down Arlington Avenue past the drugstore and video place, turning right on Market Street. Alika's bells ring once or twice, but her step is slow. The backpack is heavy. She has to concentrate on these new directions.

"Hey, where you going?" Rover stands right in front of her. "Ain't you supposed to be at school?"

Alika shrugs. "I'm taking a different way."

Rover shakes his head. "Are you crazy, girl? This is no place for you. Don't you know you are heading right into a war zone?"

Alika smirks. "This is what my mama wants me to do."

"You better turn around right now," Rover says. "'Less your mama wants you dead."

Alika doesn't mind turning around, because suddenly she remembers everything. She walks back home. She doesn't feel like singing. When she gets to their building she looks up and sees that the windows are all open, even the windows in the forbidden room. She walks up the hot dark stairs. She gets there just as her mama is stepping into the hallway with her suitcase.

"Hi, Mama," Alika says.

Alika's mama turns, her face rock, liquid, rock. "What are you doing here?"

"I forgot to hug you good-bye," Alika says.

Her mama steps back. Then, with swift precision, she steps forward as she reaches into her pocket, pulls out the little key, and unlocks Alika's backpack. She runs across the apartment and throws the backpack out the window. Even before it hits the ground she is wrapped around Alika. They are crouched, in tight embrace. After a few seconds, she lets go.

"You all right, Mama?" Alika says.

She nods, slowly.

"I don't know what to tell my teacher about my books. What should I tell her, Mama?"

Pauline gets up, walks across the apartment and leans out the window. Scattered on the ground below is the backpack, and several large books. She is shaking her head, trying to understand what has happened, when she sees Alika, with her belled braids, skipping down the steps, walking wide around the scattered contents of her backpack. Then,

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with a quick look up at the window, Alika breaks into a run, her bells ringing.

Pauline turns, fast. She looks at her suitcase in the hallway, runs to it, thinking (Alika?) she will toss it out the window, but she is not fast enough.

ALL THE DEAD CHILDREN are reaching for her. She tries to exhale, but there is no breath. She sinks where she steps, grabbed by the tiny, bony fingers pulling her into the frozen depths. Rusty nails clutched in the ice children's hands pierce her skin. How quiet it is, the white silence punctuated only by the distant sound of bells. Why, that's Alika, she thinks, that's my girl. Astonished. Proud. Angry.

Alika stands, gazing at the bombed building, feeling certain there is something she has forgotten. An annoying fly, which has been circling her head, lands on her arm and Alika soundlessly slaps it, leaving a bright red mark on her skin, which she rubs until the burning stops. Then she turns and skips down the walk in this mysterious silent world, even her belled braids gone suddenly mute. An ambulance speeds past, the red light flashing, but making no sound, and Alika suddenly understands what has occurred. She has fallen into the frozen world. Surely her mother will come for her, surely her brave mother will risk everything to save her. Alika looks up at the white sky, reaches her arms to the white sun, bawling like a baby, waiting for her beautiful mother to come.

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George Tucker contributed "Welcome to Justice 2.0" to our Jan. 2004 issue. He returns with a story that grew out of his experience working in an advertising office during the hottest phase of Miami's housing boom, when "anyone who had a heartbeat flipped three or four condos at a time." Now that the market has cooled, he thinks this story is a bit more hopeful than it seemed then.

Mr. Tucker still lives in southern Florida but these days he works in internet marketing, where he is surely gathering material for many more stories.

Circle

By George Tucker

AT THE SHOUTS, BILLY BLACK, carpenter's assistant second class, looked up and saw the twinkling glass cockpit of the construction crane some hundred feet overhead. His eyes flicked to the pallet-load of cement bags on the end of the crane's long cable. He saw the load tilt, lazy, as if it wanted a midair rest. A moment later something snapped and the sacks, each the size of a man's torso and weighing fifty pounds, plummeted to the earth. He sprinted toward the crash.

Some of the bags had hit the side of the Circle condominium and ripped open, scattering harmless gray powder through the air. Like a volcano, Billy thought. A few had ripped through the deal scaffolding, leaving behind nothing but ragged splinters. A crowd clustered around something and Billy pushed his way through.

One of the younger workers, Alberto, he thought, had a gash in his lower leg. Billy dropped to his knees and pulled off his belt. He slapped a man with a mustache and shouted, "Ambulance!" then

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wrapped the cracked leather strap around the boy's leg, just above the knee. The flow of blood, astonishingly red in the bright sun, slowed immediately.

"*¿Hace él recupera?*" someone asked. Will he be okay?

"*Yo no sé,*" Billy said. He couldn't look away from the blood at first. He spent a long moment remembering something he'd read about the Medieval masons' practice of mixing the blood of a sacrificial animal with their mortar. The boy's face had gone gray, not just with cement powder but with shock. Billy sent two men after a tarp and had the boy's legs up on a sawhorse when the paramedics picked their way through the construction debris to his side.

All in all, a good thing they were so near Jackson Memorial Hospital, Billy thought. Nearly every week, someone or other from the construction site headed to the emergency room.

"The other men hate you, you know," said Neil Adler, the project manager. He sat behind his scarred teak desk that probably had been valuable once but now was Salvation Army material. Adler's bald head had a matte finish, as though he'd powdered it. An industrial-strength air conditioner blew iceberg-cold every hour he sat in his trailer. Of course he didn't sweat. In fact, Billy had only seen him outside when Adler was walking to or from the parking garage down the block.

Billy nodded to acknowledge Adler's words.

"Saving somebody like you did, that was a real show of cool-headedness."

"I'm sure your head is far cooler."

Adler shrugged. "Perhaps. Nevertheless." He shuffled some papers. "Do you know why you're not a full-fledged carpenter's assistant?"

"I was unsuited for more responsibility," Billy said. He rubbed his eyes for a moment, still seeing the scarlet blood soaking into the blasted earth. "Like you said, the other men hate me."

"But I know why. Do you?" It wasn't exactly a silence, not with the AC cranking like a passenger jet at takeoff. "I'll tell you, Black. Billy, right? You scare them."

Billy said nothing. The sweat had dried on his body some time ago and now he felt chilled.

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"You never smash your thumb with a hammer. Your power tools never stop working. You talk to yourself, they say. Leave little bits of food lying around. Why is that?"

Billy stood. "Thank you for the compliments, Mr. Adler, and for letting me cool off in here. But I'm afraid I'll catch cold. I'm going back to work."

"Sit down. You're still on the clock." There was no strength left in Adler's stooped body, but there was authority. The other men on the lot sometimes talked about Adler, the way he used to be a couple years ago, when the project started, before the heart attacks. Now his burly muscle was gone, his hair was gone, and all he clung to was the haughty habit of power. Billy didn't like it. But Adler was right — Billy was still on the clock, and it was novel to earn his wages on his ass. He eased himself into the chair.

"I wanted to know a little bit more about you," Adler said.

"Not a lot to know."

"But some." Adler held up a clipped-out Yellow Pages ad. "You recognize this?"

Of course he did. Billy had labored for hours over the text he'd wanted in the ad. He still remembered the exact words: *Injun Billy, Authentic Seminole Shaman — fortunes told — auras aligned — curses lifted — lost items found.* Billy nodded.

"So why is it that you're the only one unaffected by all this — this bad luck? These misfortunes?"

That evening, in the long red hours before the sun finally clocked out, Billy drove his battered pickup into the Everglades, down a rarely used trail. He ignored the new NO TRESPASSING and PROPERTY OF signs, bounced over familiar ruts, and parked where the trail ended. He slogged through a wide, muddy declivity under the arching limbs of ancient cypresses. The slightest elevation formed an island in the river of grass. Pines and other hardwoods took advantage of the drier earth to root deeply and stretch limbs toward the clear purple sky.

Billy found the nursery log under which he'd buried his grandfather, the shaman Jack Twofeathers. Mosquitoes buzzed through the thick air. A few years back, when Billy had interred his grandfather, this vast swath

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had been a national park. Now it was the Glades Economic Development Zone — the latest real estate free-for-all.

Billy sat on a camp stool in front of the Army-surplus pup tent that was, at present, his home. A slight breeze and the bobbing fronds of fiddlehead ferns kept him reasonably cool at night. He'd sold nearly everything he owned and was $21,084 away from the down payment he needed to buy this lot — a little less each payday. In the meantime, he squatted.

Billy lit a small fire and heated up water for a cup of coffee. He savored its bitter heat and sat, perfectly still, until the sounds of the swamp began. Alligators grunted and bullfrogs *jug-rumped*, and, not far away, he heard the whine of chainsaws. Is there anyplace left in the world to go and not hear machines, not hear trees falling?

Billy was a ninth-generation Miami native, born in St. Francis Hospital (now condo Aqua) on Miami Beach and raised on the west side of the county, where owls hooted and hunted and summer brushfires raged. He remembered dirt roads and trailer parks where, now, there were massive gated developments full of South American expatriates whose three-story houses clustered shoulder-to-shoulder as if in fear of the remaining sliver of wilderness.

Billy shook his head. He needed money. He needed enough for a down payment to keep his grandfather's remains from being turned up by a backhoe.

THE NEXT DAY, Billy sat in a waiting room on the top floor of the Vanguard Building on Brickell Avenue, the financial heart of Miami. A receptionist he thought he recognized from the cover of a magazine bade him sit on something that looked more like modern art than furniture. Through a narrow window, he could see traffic, gleaming motes far below. People barely seemed to exist. Looking west, over the city, he could see the stately ranks of tall buildings marching west, to the Everglades. At this height he would've been able to see farther but a brown haze hung over the city — typical, for summer — and veiled the horizon. Billy left the view and looked through the artfully arranged brochures on the low granite tabletop.

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He thought the preconstruction business strange, the idea of selling someone an apartment they'd never even seen, based completely on glossy brochures like these and promises. Castles in the air. The pages he flipped through had artists' renderings of what the finished Circle condo *should* look like, what the amenities *might* be, the *expected* date construction would be finished — which was, Billy noted, two months ago. The building he'd left yesterday was only twelve stories of bare cement and rebar.

He waited long enough for his butt to go completely numb before the receptionist called him over and gave him permission to push on the heavy riveted doors that opened into the Vanguard Group's conference room.

Tall windows looked to the east and south, over the blue ocean dotted with cruise ships and the towers of lower Brickell Avenue. Somewhere far below, he thought he saw a dolphin leap out of the water. Buzzards soared past at eye level, riding the thermals and updrafts produced by the cluster of skyscrapers. Nature on one hand and man's greatest triumphs over it on the other, Billy thought.

A marble-topped table nearly filled the conference room. At the end, silhouetted by the turquoise water, sat a man with a big square head and sideburns razored within a millimeter of extinction. On the man's left sat Adler, looking even smaller and more stooped in the presence of Terrance Vanguard himself; on his right, a curly-haired woman in a frilly white shirt and cat's-eye glasses whose name, according to the pin she wore, was Lourdes. Billy strolled forward.

"This is your exorcist?" Vanguard said.

"Can't be," Billy said, "Exorcists're Catholic." He sat down next to Adler and realized he still held the brochures from the lobby. He spread them on the table.

"Billy Black," Adler said, "meet — "

"No introduction necessary. Mr. Vanguard, I recognize you from the billboards," Billy said.

Vanguard frowned. "Mr. Black, I'm glad you're here. Your boss here was just telling me that his project is fourteen months behind schedule because of ghosts. Would you agree?"

Despite a snort from the woman, Billy nodded. "As far as Mr. Adler can grasp the situation, yes."

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"Haunted?" Vanguard raised an impressive eyebrow.

"More or less," Billy said.

"Bullshit." Vanguard smashed a file to the tabletop with a crash that made Adler flinch. "Bull shit. You expect me to believe that ghosts, things I can't see, are warping drive trains and cutting cables and terrifying the men?"

"No," Billy said.

During a long, silent moment, Vanguard stared at him, lips pressed together. Billy thought maybe he'd thrown Vanguard off his stride. The silence stretched long enough that Billy opened one of the Circle promotional brochures and asked, "What's reiki massage?" He was genuinely curious.

"Oh, it's the most amazing thing," Lourdes said. "A masseuse specially trained in Eastern healing techniques aligns the energies in your body. It's so empowering, it's unbelievable."

"From these pictures, it looks like they don't actually touch you?" Billy squinted at the small graphic in the brochure.

"Of course not," she said.

The silence stretched longer. Billy took the time to enjoy the view. Far below, a flock of gulls white as spindrift circled a charter fishing boat.

Finally, Vanguard laughed. "I take your point, Black. You're no moron. But that's stuff for guests, you understand? Marketing. This is real estate, and all buildings are the same — just buildings, right? So you have to make people believe that your building is different. So you give them a spa where they can get the New Age fondling of the week, you give them a Humpback Salon where they can lie on couches and listen to whalesong through headphones, you give them a dedicated vibe consultant in case they need help picking out a color of carpet or choosing the incense that says 'cool.' Do you understand?"

Adler cleared his throat. "These are somewhat sophisticated ideas — "

"Of course I understand," Billy said. He dropped the brochure. "I've lived in Florida my whole life. I've seen the real estate cycles come and go, and we're right at the peak here. You've gotta compete with the other 134,000 units opening up in the coming year."

"Yes, and before we can do that this building has to be finished. And at this rate it's not going to be finished until — until when, Adler?" Vanguard cut his eyes to his manager.

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"That's hard to say."

"That's the problem." Vanguard leaned forward and tented his fingers. "And imagine my situation — here I am, trying like all hell to figure out how to get this project finished, and I learn there's one worker, one guy out of two hundred who's never cursing and complaining or breaking his ankle, but just quietly and efficiently doing his job. We offer to make him a supervisor and he declines. What would you do in my situation, Mr. Black?"

"I'd listen to that one lucky man. Or else I'd just go back to my golf game."

Vanguard's assistant gasped. But Vanguard threw his head back and laughed. "All right. You say it's haunted. By more than incompetence? I've been looking over the reports. Did you know the Circle site has more injuries than every other Vanguard Group project combined? It's 352 percent over budget and my backers are furious. What would you do in my place?"

Billy considered, watched a cruise ship trundle out to sea, churning its jettisoned garbage into the ocean with massive engines. "I'd turn it into a park. Level the building, landscape it, donate it to the city, take a fat tax write-off and good-guy credit."

Vanguard chuckled and shook his head. "You'd make a good marketer, Black, but you're no developer. That wouldn't work. Besides, accounting says I wouldn't get out a tenth of what I put into it. No, that building is going up."

"In that case, don't I need to get back to work?"

"Not just yet. You saved a man's life yesterday."

Billy shrugged. "I was trained as a medic in the Navy."

"And an authentic Seminole shaman, too," Vanguard said. "You're a man of parts. Why are you pushing a wheelbarrow on a construction site?"

"Why are you throwing up another gleaming phallus on the waterfront?" Billy said. "For money."

"Not much money," Adler said.

Billy shrugged. He couldn't really argue with that. But the truth was there wasn't a lot of call for a dishonorably discharged Navy medic, or a Seminole shaman either, for that matter.

"I need you to get rid of Adler's ghosts," Vanguard said. He leaned back in his chair and watched Billy through slitted eyes.

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What does he expect me to do, Billy wondered, sing? Break out a war bonnet and dance around the table? "There aren't any ghosts," Billy said.

"See?" Vanguard cut his eyes at Adler.

"They're spirits. The ancient Greeks would call them daimons."

"Demons?" Adler said. Across from him, Lourdes's eyes widened and she crossed herself.

"Daimons. Spirits of a place."

"And these daimons can break equipment and push men out of windows," Vanguard said.

"Not exactly. But they can influence the physical world."

"See?" Adler waved a hand at Billy. "Just like I told you."

"If they really are daimons you can't just chase them off with a little holy water and some Latin," Billy said. "They aren't going away if they're tied to the land. You have to figure out how to appease them."

"How?" Vanguard asked. "Don't tell me money, either."

"Not money. There are some things you can't buy," Billy said.

"But you, I can," Vanguard said. He named a figure that made Billy think. He considered himself incorruptible, above such things as filthy lucre. But it would be enough for a downpayment on his grandfather's funeral plot. It took a moment but Billy had to realize that Vanguard was right — Billy Black could be bought. Or at the very least rented for a little while.

"Oh, it's around here somewhere," the secretary said, and knocked over a Styrofoam shot glass of Cuban coffee. Billy helped her pat the stacks of memos dry with an already stained cotton shawl before allowing her to return to her own excavation in miniature.

The University of Miami campus was like all college campuses everywhere, Billy imagined, with the addition of royal and coconut palms. He'd fallen in love six times between parking his car and locating the building that held the department of archaeology and anthropology. When Vanguard's development had turned up the ancient relics that gave Circle its name, UM professors had been first on the scene. That was more than two years ago. When Vanguard retook possession of the site, the archaeologists hauled their loot back to UM. A single locked door now stood

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between Billy and the surviving evidence of the oldest human inhabitants of Florida.

"Ah-ha!" The secretary showed Billy a brass-colored key knotted on a rotting rubber band. She shuffled down an empty corridor and opened a fist-sized padlock. The hinges of the door squealed like souls in torment.

"When's the last time anyone was down here?"

The secretary shrugged.

Inside, shadows and the smell of dust. One of the overhead lights fizzled out when Billy flipped the switch. Maybe a fragment of the curse was operating over here? Billy stared at flint knives, piles of turtle shells carved with strange glyphs, and even the altar stone itself — a hunk of schist the size of a kitchen table, with blood grooves along its sides. A framed diagram of the site hung on the wall. The turtles had been sacrificed, it was believed, and buried with their faces pointing to the east.

This strange thing we call reverence, Billy thought, and the strange ways we practice it. He sat at a sticky plastic table at a UM outdoor cafeteria, eating a burrito and pondering the ineffable. The ancient inhabitants showed their reverence by decorating and burying their sacrifices in their holy place. Vanguard's customers equated reverence with commerce and showed reverence by spending lots of money. What about himself? Billy wiped his chin with a paper napkin. How did he show reverence? He thought of his grandfather. By carrying on, he decided. By continuing the tradition.

"What in God's name are you doing?" Adler said.

Billy stood just inside the door of Adler's trailer, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light. The bells and metal charms on the heavy buckskin leggings chimed. Billy adjusted the feathered war bonnet and wiped his forehead.

"Go out there, get the workers to make a pile of scraps. Wood, paper, anything that'll burn," Billy said.

"You look like an ethnic joke," Adler said.

"You know what paleopsychology is?"

Adler shook his head.

"Exactly. Now, go outside and get that pile made. Then gather the workers together. Ten minutes."

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After a long goggle-eyed stare, Adler stood and shuffled out the door, leaving Billy in the dark trailer with the wheezing air conditioner.

THE IDLE CROWD of workers stood clotted into small murmuring groups, arms folded, cigarettes tucked into corners of mouths. All fell silent when Billy walked out. He set the boom box down, turned the volume up to maximum and pressed PLAY. The CD inside began to spin. Billy let his eyes widen to their limits, his face frozen into a wild, fierce expression. The kettledrums pounded, and Billy shouted. "Hi-ya-ya!" Everyone looked now — no more murmurs. He raised the turtle-shell rattle. Drums boomed. Billy shouted and spun — the twin tails of the war bonnet lifted like wings. The beaded tassels of his leather leggings rattled and clashed. He danced around the shoulder-high pile of scraps, chanting and surreptitiously squirting lighter fluid so that, in the pause when he lit a wooden kitchen match against his bared teeth (taste of sulfur) and cast it into the pile, flames flared ten feet high. A gasp from his onlookers — Billy knew he had them now. A few muttered, "*Brujeria*," and crossed themselves. Billy chanted and danced, cast handfuls of dust into the air, sketched out runes on the ground and stomped on them. Sweat poured down his face, his body — the gear weighed about sixty pounds and the bloated, declining sun was punishingly hot. Billy sang every chant he knew and made up new ones. He leapt and spun, breathed fire with the help of a mouthful of PGA, and shook his rattle over each of the men. A few grinned but most kept their faces still and noble.

Within an hour, the fire had burned down to ashes and blackened scraps. Billy's arms and legs felt limp as ropes and the CD was almost over. He stood tall, raised his hands, and clapped along with the last three beats, "Hi-ya-ya!" Then he spun and danced away, behind a huge spool of thick electrical cable. Over his own panting he heard Adler dismissing the men. He smiled. In a few minutes he could change out of this anchor-heavy outfit and back into his jeans. Rivers of sweat coursed down his body and his shoulders ached from the weight of the metal-studded buckskin coat. Now he remembered why he didn't take the ritual gear out more often. He thought about asking Adler to procure the tools he needed for Phase Two of the exorcism and chuckled between gasps.

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At the moment, the curse was lifted — at least as far as the workers were concerned. Now all he had to do was figure out how to appease the restless spirits of the Miami Circle.

Later that evening, after the sun slid behind the concrete city walls and all the workers had trudged to the bus stop talking about the show, Billy returned to the now-locked Circle site. Adler had given the security guard the night off and slipped Billy a gate key.

Billy found an aluminum ladder and climbed up to the highest point on the embryonic building — a naked I-beam between two support pillars — with a heavy convenience store bag dangling from one hand. To the east, he could see the dark sweep of the Intracoastal waterway and the rainbow spangle of Miami Beach. Lights shone in many high-rise windows. He couldn't see a single star.

Billy opened the plastic bag and took out a six of Mickey's and a pack of unfiltered Camels. He gulped down one of the bottles of cool malt liquor, trying not to taste it, and set the empty on the I-beam beside him. He could already feel a dim gray veil, like mental glaucoma, descending on his mind. Twofeathers had taught him that, to commune with spirits, one must befuddle one's senses. Mesoamerican shamans used ritual preparations of hallucinogenic jungle plants. But pot always made him throw up and peyote was impossible to find these days, so Billy worked with the tools at hand.

Billy belched and set the second empty next to the first. He lit a Camel and puffed it to life. He'd learned the sacred uses of tobacco, and how the white men had perverted it into a recreational activity, from his grandfather. We Indians take our drugs seriously, Billy thought woozily. He blew puffs of smoke in the four cardinal directions, then up at the sky (still no stars), then down at the ground. He kept cigarettes burning like incense while he drank.

A curious arrangement of buildings and security lights cast this half of the construction site into dark, blue-edged shadow. By the light of the burning cigarette Billy found the sweaty Mickeys and killed them, one by one.

Midway through the fifth, just when he was feeling bloated and gassy with carbonation and trying to figure out if he could pee without leaving

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his perch, he noticed the figure sitting next to him. Billy teetered on the edge of panic for a moment, but he recovered and grabbed hold of the I-beam. When had this guy climbed up? And why wasn't he wearing any clothes?

The lean figure glowed with a silvery light and leaned forward, staring out to sea. Billy stared owlishly at the skinny limbs and tried to decide if the other was really there. He wasn't sure if the other had even noticed him. Billy gave up when it turned to him and said, "Isn't this a little dangerous? I mean, couldn't you do all this down on the ground?"

"What's your name?" Billy said. By stating its name, a spirit announced that it was benign and had no evil intentions toward the summoner. He kept his cigarette poised like a hypodermic needle, just in case.

"Eschewherry. That's my name, Billy Black." The onyx-eyed face turned toward the strip of ocean.

"Thought the view was...pretty," Billy mumbled, suddenly embarrassed. He felt a distinct sense of relief — Eschewherry hadn't flown out at him, seemed cooperative. At least he could stop drinking this disgusting stuff now. He saw, through the spirit's gleaming form, the line of fat empty bottles. Holy crap, he thought, surprised as he was every time. It worked!

The bald head turned back to him. "And why are you sitting here enjoying the view and evoking spirits in the dark?"

Billy told him. At length. First about the condo, but then about why he'd taken on the task, about the unsustainable overdevelopment of the region which made rejuvenation projects like this one, paving what was already paved, a good idea. As he talked he gradually realized that the spirit wasn't bald — not exactly. The top of its skull was a bone-smooth turtle shell. Sort of like one of the cheap special effects you'd see on one of the old *Star Trek* shows. The thought made Billy laugh, and the laugh interrupted his rant.

The spirit considered him for a long moment. "What do you want me to do?"

Billy shrugged and waved his hand at the lot. "Let 'em build the thing."

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"Well, why not?"

The spirit shook its turtle head and made a small sound that could've been a sigh, or perhaps a small wave breaking on a sandy shore. "They've disturbed a holy site. A quiet, peaceful, sacred place." The spirit shrugged. "At least it used to be. You can't just let people get away with that. If you do," it pointed across the Intracoastal, at the neon and glitz sprawl of South Beach, "the whole world will look like that."

Billy squinted in thought. The spirit's form faded, and for a terrified moment he thought he'd heard its final word on the issue. Then he realized his cigarette had gone out and he lit another after a long fumbling moment that left white cylinders and kitchen matches scattered in his lap. The gray smoke curled into the air and almost immediately the spirit's body seemed to solidify. Whew.

"What if," Billy said, "they put everything back exactly like they found it?"

The spirit stared at him. "And then just paved over it? That's not acceptable."

"You let 'em, somebody, do it before." Billy pointed at the ground. "This is hardly virgin real estate."

The spirit spread his empty hands wide. Billy saw its fingers were webbed, which threatened to set off a new burst of hilarity that he managed, just barely, to smother. "True," it admitted. "But that was before they violated our sacred site. Before they even ripped into the earth and discovered the offerings. Your people know. They know and just don't care."

Billy chewed on that for a moment. Somewhat at random, he asked, "What about Adler?"

"Adler's a putz."

Billy sat quietly for a time, trying to jump-start his malt-liquored brain into thought. He puffed another Camel alight and, in the brief orange flare, he saw the spirit had no ears. He'd never really believed Twofeathers's teachings about spirits, that they were independent intelligent entities who had their own cares and concerns. Himself, he'd always thought spirits were an artifice constructed in the mind of the shaman who was really communicating with something transcendent — something both more and less than this figure sitting beside him. Besides, would a spirit really call someone a putz?

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Billy shook his head so violently he almost fell. Think, damn it. The issue wasn't that Vanguard was building here. There'd been a parking garage or a department store or — something. Didn't really matter what, did it? That wasn't what pissed the spirits off. Were its toes webbed, too? Focus! What had the spirit said? "They know and just don't care."

Then he had an idea. He turned it over in his soggy mind for a moment. He took a swig of the flat, warm dregs of his drink and told the spirit his plan.

BILLY WOKE to a pounding head, a mouth that tasted like an old welder's glove, and a stiff neck. He looked around for a long moment before he remembered where he was. After he and the spirit had reached an agreement — how the hell had he climbed down the ladder? — he'd kicked in the door of Adler's trailer, made a few scrawls on the back of an envelope, and passed out on the floor. A stack of manila folders had served as his pillow.

He took a few moments to gather his notes and went outside. The heat and pressure of the sunlight made him throw up. He sagged against the trailer for a moment, gathering his strength. I'm earning Vanguard's money, he thought. He stumbled away from the smell of his vomit and snuck out the gate when the first of the day's shift came in. Through the black curtain of his hangover he could see the workers looked, if not cheerful, at least not frightened. Resigned to the day's work in the brutal heat. Joking with one another in Spanish, grinning.

He found his pickup and burned his hands on the steering wheel. He needed time to gather his thoughts and — he sniffed — take a shower before he saw Vanguard again.

"Hell is this?" Vanguard said, his thick finger prodding a square on Billy's diagram.

"That — ah," Billy glanced down at his notes, "is the altar stone."

Vanguard grumbled and his assistant Lourdes jotted something on her clipboard. Billy wondered if she'd ever written the phrase "altar stone" before.

"The hell am I going to get all the, the bones and knives and that altar stone?" Vanguard said, glaring at Billy. It wasn't personal — at least Billy didn't think it was. Vanguard had the look of a man who'd been told that

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his five-dollar lunch special was going to cost him two grand, and that he needed to pay in cash, right now, please.

"Most of the artifacts are at the University of Miami. I'm sure a few judicious donations to the right departments would do the trick." Billy showed him a confident smile. "Especially once they know what you're going to do with them."

Vanguard frowned at Adler, who sat slumped staring at the diagram on the conference table. Billy took a moment to savor the view from the floor-to-ceiling windows. On a clear day, it was said, you could see the Bahamas from the top of Vanguard's Brickell tower.

"Ridiculous!" Vanguard said and slammed a hand like a gunshot against the marble tabletop. "No way I'll turn my lobby into a museum!"

"Mr. Adler," Billy said, "in the last week, have there been any difficulties at the construction site? Complications? How many suicides?"

Adler shifted in his chair. "No. Everything's going smoothly. Except some bum snuck in, made a big mess in my trailer."

"And there won't be any." Billy nodded.

"Because you bribed the — spirits," Vanguard said.

"No, Mr. Vanguard, you did. I paid them in promises. In these promises." He tapped the diagram. "Because you told me how important this whole thing was. But it's up to you to keep those promises."

"Most ridiculous thing I ever heard of," Vanguard said.

"Or it could be a public relations coup," Billy said. "Think about it. What other projects can claim to have their own spiritual advisor? Claim to be in tune with the Earth itself? You're already calling the building Circle. Now we're giving it a real identity."

"He's right," Adler said. "It's a lot more interesting than reiki massage." Maybe he wasn't such a putz after all.

Vanguard grimaced and rubbed his eyes. "These wall hangings?"

"Traditional Seminole designs. I can put you in touch with some local artisans — "

"Lourdes! Courier this over to the architect. Copy to the design firm. Go, go!"

The woman scurried out of the room, leaving only a waft of floral perfume and the receding echo of spike heels.

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"Adler. Back to the site. No more complications."

"There won't be," Adler said. He stood and, to Billy's surprise, gave his hand a firm shake before strolling out the door.

"There's more you need to know," Billy told Vanguard. He wasn't sure if he was going too far. "I need to be there. On-site. Make sure it's all done right, you know, manage the process."

Vanguard closed his eyes for a moment and gave a small nod. "'Course. How much?"

Billy named an amount equal to his mortgage downpayment. Vanguard didn't blink. "Fine."

Billy stood and offered his hand. Vanguard took it and, for the first time Billy could remember, smiled.

"I like you. Like your shtick. You ever think of going into marketing? Development?"

"No," Billy said.

"Don't," Vanguard said. The smile was gone. "I'd crush you. You got one over on me now, Black. PR value of having you on-site's worth a lot. But it's just marketing, get it? Just reiki massage."

On the morning of the grand opening eight months later, Billy strolled through the lobby, all smiles. One wall bore a lovingly detailed mural depicting this site as it had been two thousand years ago, complete with ritual dancers spinning around the limestone altar. Other swarthy men paddled canoes in the Intracoastal (and, if you looked closely, you would see that one of the figures had distinctly webbed fingers). A blue heron soared through the clear air. The remaining walls were covered with beaded tapestries woven by Seminole craftswomen who'd worked nonstop these last months to complete the order. Tastefully lit glass cases held stone knives, incised bones, and a few reconstructed clay vessels.

Someone, maybe Lourdes, had taken the trouble to clip and frame some of the stories the *Herald* and other papers had run about Circle's transformation. Vanguard was being hailed as one of the few forward-looking developers for integrating local culture and history into this project. "Most condos," one influential columnist posited, "have all the character of a strip mall. Their much-vaunted uniqueness is only so much marketing. Circle is truly different and completely unique."

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Billy joined Vanguard, Adler, and the crowd of reporters and PR flacks on the portico. At least three gaggles of grade school kids waited patiently in the heat for the opportunity to be among the first to tour the lobby.

With a pair of oversized gold-plated scissors, Vanguard cut the pale blue ribbon that ran across the entry to Circle. He smiled. He reached over and shook Billy's hand for the camera. "You're fired," he said.

Tales of *brujeria*, widespread by his former coworkers at the Circle site, prevented even the most understaffed foremen from hiring him. Billy spent the days driving from construction site to construction site. He even applied for a job working a drive-through window at a fast food establishment. With Vanguard's money he'd managed the downpayment on the Everglades lot and had a deed, sealed and buried in an ammunition box under his tent. He no longer had to worry himself with eviction. Instead, he owed monthly payments to the bank. The due date was coming fast and Billy was starting to feel desperate.

He'd hoped his work on Circle, the technique he called either culturally specific feng shui or urban planning for the new millennium, might gain him a few other contracts. Enough for a reasonable income. He'd even updated his Yellow Pages ad. Unfortunately, like Eli Whitney's cotton gin, Billy's concept had been so simple and obvious it didn't require any special talent whatsoever to set oneself up as a practitioner. The cell phone didn't ring. The sound of falling trees grew louder and louder. In his darker moments, he imagined that twenty years from now an intrepid young reporter would track him down, the man who'd pioneered the interesting lobby, and be surprised — even heartbroken — to find him whiling away his years, playing solitaire, perhaps, on a tiny sliver of green in an ocean of concrete and glass.

One evening, after he'd been turned down by nine employers (apparently he wasn't qualified to be a janitor, a yard worker, or a plumber's helper), he sat beside a modest campfire and nearly fell off his camp stool when his beat-up cell phone rang. Couldn't be the bank, the payment wasn't due for five days at least — they couldn't know he didn't have the money, could they?

"Mr. Black? Mr. Billy Black, the shaman?"

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He admitted that he was.

"I'm Arabella Bishop, Circle unit 3311. I just moved in and I need a purification, the psychic clutter's just unbelievable." She gave a grating giggle. "I've looked all over for you. Why aren't you on site?"

Billy saw the green gleam of an alligator's eyes in the undergrowth. "You should speak to Mr. Vanguard about that."

"Building management's been no help at all. Can you be here, say, Wednesday at eleven?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Vanguard didn't see fit to continue to employ my services. You should speak to him directly." Billy snapped the phone shut and nearly threw it into the trees. But in the end he held on to it, just in case the manager at the pizza place needed another delivery driver.

One week later, Billy was frying his morning eggs and drinking scorched coffee when he heard the crash of a large animal in the undergrowth. His first thought was of his shotgun, now in a Hialeah pawn shop. He tensed, ready to fling sizzling grease onto whatever came out of the bushes.

"Do you have any idea," Vanguard shouted, "how hard it is to find this goddamn place?" He strode out of the vegetation and shook dead leaves from his pants cuff.

"That's the whole point," Billy said. He relaxed and flipped his eggs with a spoon.

"So, whose idea was it to organize a harassment campaign? Half the tenants at Circle are calling my office. Last night I was accosted at dinner — at dinner! — by a woman named Bishop."

"I can sympathize," Billy said. "I'd offer you a seat, but — here, this ground cloth's mostly dry." Billy started to eat his eggs.

"How can you live like this?" Vanguard remained standing. "It's disgusting."

Billy smiled through the mouthful of eggs. "We have different standards of disgusting. Now, explain to me how I'm supposed to keep the residents of your condo project from calling you?"

Vanguard made a pained face. "I screwed up, Black. I screwed up by letting you on board in the first place. Now everyone associates you with Circle. Circle, shaman. Personally I think you're a complete phony, but I can't find anyone to replace you. There's one guy in Kamchatka." Vanguard shrugged. "But his relocation expenses are astronomical."

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Billy finished the last bite of his breakfast. "I'd love to hear more, but right now that idea I came up with is red hot. Arveeta are working on a new development called Happy Hunting Grounds. They're going to need a Seminole shaman too." Billy dumped out the dregs of his coffee. "Now I know we're in such short supply, maybe I'll wait for a bidding war to start."

Vanguard clenched his jaw. "Here we go again," he muttered. "What exactly would it take to bring you on board?"

Billy reached into his back pocket and pulled out a tattered map of the Glades Free Enterprise Zone. It had been folded and unfolded so many times that the crease lines were white, marking the forest in neat pale grids. "Let me show you exactly what I want."

Epilogue

Excerpt from a Vanguard Group press release

> "Over forty percent of the Everglades Free Enterprise Zone will be preserved in its natural state in perpetuity," explained Lourdes Garcia, spokesperson for the Vanguard Group. "This offers residents and visitors a unique opportunity to experience all the wonders of the natural environment while residing in some of the finest single-family homes ever constructed...."

Extract from a Circle brochure given to new owners

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CURIOSITIES

THE STOLEN MARCH, BY DORNFORD YATES (1926)

DORNFORD Yates (real name Cecil Mercer) retains a cult following for two linked fiction series, both very English: the Chandos thrillers and the Berry comedies of upper-class misadventure.

His little-known *The Stolen March* has Berry connections and begins with high-spirited criminal capers on a Continental tour, bringing together two young couples who then stumble into the lost country of Etchechuria.

This lies between France and Spain, hidden by compass-jamming magnetic mountains and by magic. It's a medieval fairyland, where visitors must outwit malign dwarfs and be equally wary of ogres and husband-hungry princesses. Further devices include shape-changing, talking animals, invisibility cloaks and the Philosopher's Stone.

As in the *Alice* books, inhabitants are addicted to lunatic whimsy and logic-chopping. A manufacturing town is named Date because, naturally, "All the best stuff's out of Date." Nursery-rhyme allusions abound.

One visitor can out-talk the gabby natives: Pomfret, whose grumpy magniloquence is reminiscent of Yates's Berry, the English squire. Like Berry, he's fond of comparing people to "blue-based baboons"; unlike Berry, he's threatened with transformation into one....

Eventually the country's hospitality becomes overwhelming. Unwanted honors must be accepted on pain of death. A madcap chase sequence ensues as our outlawed tourists flee through glowing rustic scenery: Yates loved descriptive ecstasies about both landscape and women. All ends idyllically, thanks to creative real-world use of the Midas touch.

Somehow the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (1997), though mentioning Yates in passing, missed this comic fairytale.

—David Langford

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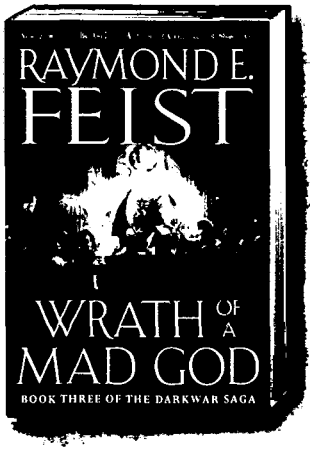

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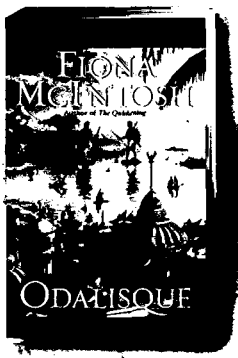

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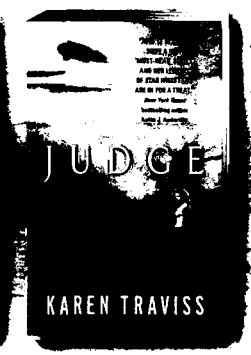

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